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BOB ROCKETT, THE BANK RUNNER; or, THE ROAD TO RUIN.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS," "PHIL HARDY," "PICAYUNE PETE," "DETECTIVE DICK," "HANDSOME HARRY," "WILL WILDFIRE, THE THOROUGHBRED," "BLACK BESS, WILL WILDFIRE'S RACER," "MIKE MERRY, THE HARBOR POLICE BOY," "BILLY BAGGAGE," "WILL WILDFIRE IN THE WOODS," "A TRUMP CARD," ETC., ETC.



THE ALERT FINGERS OF THIS ADROIT PICKPOCKET SLIPPED THE BOOK FROM THE INSIDE POCKET OF HIS COAT.

Bob Rockett,

THE BANK RUNNER;

OR, THE ROAD TO RUIN.

A TALE OF LIFE IN NEW YORK.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BOB ROCKETT, THE BOY DODGER,"
"A TRUMP CARD," "BILLY BAGGAGE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN EVENING'S SPORT.

It was evening in the great city of New York. The gas-lights had been long kindled, and shed their dim luster on the crowded streets, for these were the long winter evenings, when night soon followed the shortened day. There was a chill in the air, as if snow hung in the mid heavens, waiting its due time to fall. The wayfarers were hurrying homeward out of the shivering breeze.

At the corner of Chambers street and Broadway, near the buildings, and out of the hurrying human tide, stood a young man. He was in figure short and stout, his broad shoulders indicating great strength, while his face was one which it was somewhat puzzling to decide upon. Small, deep-set eyes, thick lips, and a nose that had received a slight twist from some old injury, were the unattractive features of a face that was otherwise good looking.

He was stylishly dressed, and wore a diamond pin in his shining shirt bosom, and a gold watch chain of such size and dimensions that it looked strong enough to hold an ox. The slender, elastic cane in his hand tapped nervously against his polished boot, as he closely eyed the passing throng.

"Is he playing on me?" he muttered between his clenched teeth. "Let him look out if he is. He may find that he is barking up the wrong tree."

His face lighted up with a sudden gleam as he caught sight of a figure in the crowd. It was that of a handsome, slenderly-built young man, with a nonchalant expression on his somewhat dissipated countenance.

"Hey, Roger! You're not going to slip by at that rate, without even a good-evening to a fellow?" asked the first mentioned young man, as he laid his hand on the shoulder of the other. "Is that your way of keeping an appointment?"

"Ha, Bob, is it you? I was looking for you. How are you, anyhow? It's a confounded shiver to-night. Come ahead: let's get under shelter somewhere."

"All right, my boy," returned Bob, as they walked on together. "You haven't forgot? Come provided, I hope?"

"Provided for what?" replied Roger, with a haughty look. "Will you be kind enough to explain yourself?"

"For that little set-to," answered Bob. "You've got such a confounded short memory, that you mustn't mind my stirring you up."

"Perhaps you'll wish you hadn't," was the rejoinder. "You might waken up a wild-cat. But you're early. I haven't had a bite of supper yet. Shall we go down to Joe Cracker's? His steaks are divine. And you never tasted such a Welsh rabbit."

"I'm convenient. I'll take a snack with you. Then we'll travel down to Harry Blake's, if you're on it."

"I'm your man.—This corner, Bob. Joe's place lies just below here."

In a few minutes more they found themselves within an English eating-house, celebrated for its good suppers. It had a sanded floor and tables sitting here and there, around which several parties were gathered.

Bob gave his orders with a quick air of authority, and fell into conversation again with Bob as he waited for his supper.

"Do you know if that little thing was done for me to-day?" he asked, carelessly, as he sat idly balancing a fork on his finger.

"Lord! yes. Why, they're always done. You have the credit of a Rothschild."

"More credit than cash, perhaps," replied Roger, easily. "Ah! you're my man," to the waiter, who just then appeared with smoking platters. "Now, a brace of your London stout. Look about lively."

"How the flends do you get these fellows to stir so? Why, there are tables over there still waiting. Let me into the secret."

"I keep the whole concern in my pay," an-

swered Roger. "Likely enough we are eating somebody else's supper. He that don't learn to tip must learn to wait."

At that moment an ill-looking fellow, dressed in coarse, rough attire, entered the saloon with a swaggering gait.

Passing the table where the two young men were engaged at their supper, he suddenly stopped and fixed his eyes on Bob's face with a look of half-recognition. There was something threatening in his glance.

The young men went on eating, without noticing him. In an instant he swaggered on, a low curse escaping his lips.

"I must twig that coon's nose ag'in. I've see'd him afore, somewhar. Seems to me as if I've got a crow to pluck with him."

Pouring down a glassful of whisky at the bar, with as much ease as though it were so much water, he turned back. This time he brushed past Bob, so close as to jostle his chair.

"What in the blazes ails you?" cried the young man, with quick anger. "Isn't the room big enough for you and me?"

"It were only an accident," replied the man, apologetically. "Owin' to whisky, maybe. A chap can't help getting tangled up sometimes. Beg pardon."

As he spoke his eyes were fixed with a keen glance on Bob's face, as if bent on gaining the secret of that countenance.

"Don't try it on too much," rejoined Bob, ungraciously, as he looked up.

On catching sight of the man's face a sudden shiver seemed to run through him. His eyes fell; but were immediately raised again, with a defiant look.

"Well, do you want to take my photograph?" he angrily asked. "Make tracks now, my friend, while you've got whole bones. I'm not the sort to try your horse-play on."

"Diamonds! gold chains! and talks like a colonel!" said the fellow, insolently. "Bless my eyes, he's my Lord Somebody from somewhere; and I'm only Mr. Nobody from nowhere. Guess I'll make tracks while I've got whole bones, as he advises."

Bob half rose, as the fellow swaggered away. But Roger touched his arm with a light but authoritative gesture.

"Sit still now," he said, in his low, easy tone. "If you rub your hands on a black kettle you only get them smirched for your pains; and the kettle is none the worse for your rubbing. Tap some of that London porter. You'll find it more agreeable than to tap an insolent rough on the nose. Joe's porter is as prime as his steak."

Bob seated himself, but his eyes followed the man with an angry look. Nor had Roger failed to observe that his usually brown complexion was, just now, somewhat sallow.

"Blazes! He knowed me at sight. And maybe I didn't know him," growled the man to himself. "You bet he didn't like the look of my phiz. Six years in the stone jug ain't none too comfable, and he's one of the coons as done it. But if I won't git even, shoot me!"

The young men turned again to their supper. Finishing it they each lighted a cigar, and sallied out into the street.

"Step out now," said Roger. "I've got warmed through to the bones in at Joe's and don't want to get chilled to the marrow."

"All right. Shall it be to Harry's?"

"Suit yourself. I'm open."

A short walk brought them to an establishment to which admittance was not so easy as at Joe Cracker's. A door opened on a flight of stairs that led to the second floor of a plain-fronted building. Here Bob gave a peculiar knock, that was answered by the door opening a crack, and a fellow peering out.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Friends, and performers," answered Bob.

The chap now seemed to recognize him, and threw the door open, giving free entrance to the room.

It was a large apartment which the friends entered, and brilliantly lit up, its lights displaying a considerable number of persons, variously engaged.

At one end of the room several men stood before a table on which were represented the thirteen cards of a suit, from ace to king. A person seated behind the table was dealing out a pack of cards, alternately to right and left. On some of the cards painted upon the table lay variously colored round checks, which the observers anxiously watched as the dealing proceeded.

In another part of the room was a horizontal wheel, to which the performer gave a quick whirl, as he flung into it, with a skillful move-

ment, a small ivory ball. Elsewhere were tables at which sat parties diligently engaged in play.

It was evidently a full-fledged gambling saloon, fitted up with all the appliances for the dangerous sport, and apparently well patronized by the gaming fraternity.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said the proprietor. "Won't you take something to warm you up? It's chilly outside."

"Don't care if we do."

He signed to a black waiter, who brought them two wine-glasses of liquor, which they quickly drained.

"What's your play to-night? Are you going to buck the tiger?"

"No. We have a private game of poker laid out. Let us have a deck and table, Harry."

In a few minutes they were seated and the cards were brought them.

"What is it?" asked Harry Blake, the proprietor. "A set thing, eh? Are you in for high play to-night?"

"Oh, no! Only a bit of social sport. A dollar lar."

"And bet as high as you choose?"

"Or as our hands will warrant," laughed Roger, as he dealt the cards.

The game passed very quietly for several hands, their winning and losings being nearly equal.

"It's rather prosy fun, eh, Roger?" remarked Bob. "What do you think of that for a hand, Harry?"

"Whatever you want me to," responded Harry, in a non-committal tone.

"It's worth a five-dollar bet, anyhow."

"And this hand will see it, and go a ten better," replied Roger.

"Rake it in, my boy. You don't bluff worth a farthing."

Harry turned on his heel and walked away. The game was not interesting.

"Send that darky over with a taste of brandy," ordered Bob. "We want something to waken us up."

Whether or not it was the brandy that did it, but they began to play with more boldness. Their bets ran from five dollars up to fifty, and Roger won with a steadiness that seemed to annoy his antagonist. A hard, set look came upon the face of the latter.

"There's some more of your confounded luck," he ejaculated.

"A chap can't help it if he is born under a lucky star," Roger lightly replied, as he drew in his winnings.

But a deeper thought was passing in the recesses of Bob Rockett's mind.

"I must win, or I am ruined," he was repeating to himself. "I have taken a big risk for this, and by heavens! luck seems to be going dead against me."

His lips closed with a firm expression; his eyes grew keen and glittering. But as for Roger not a line of his face changed. He looked as if winning or losing was equally indifferent to him.

Bob dealt the cards with a touch of savageness in his movements.

Roger looked at his hand, and quietly laid a ten-dollar bill upon the table. Bob studied his intently for a minute.

"I will see you, and make it fifty," he said, taking a fifty-dollar bill from his pocket-book, and laying it in the pool.

Roger glanced again in his easy manner at his cards. Then he pushed his heap of winnings forward.

"A hundred and fifty better," he said. "That makes an even two hundred."

A dark frown came on Bob's brow. He looked again irresolutely at his cards, dropped his hand to the table, and then picked it up again, with a nervous twitching of the eyelids.

"I didn't come provided for a heavy bout," he said, somewhat hoarsely. "But I fancy my watch and chain will cover your bet. Here's the plunder."

He drew from his pocket a heavy gold watch, and was about loosening the massive chain, when Roger stopped him with a touch on his hand.

"Never mind that," he said. "Call your hand."

Bob looked at it again, his brows contracting.

"A pair of fours," he said, with a hardly perceptible quaver in his tone.

"And you accuse me of bluffing," replied Roger, laughing.

"The watch is yours, I suppose," remarked Bob, with a peculiar glare in his eyes.

"No, my boy. Rake down the pool. Maybe you did not accuse without reason. Your pair of fours wins."

Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.

A new light came into Bob's face. His hand was slightly nervous, as he drew the money toward him.

"It's your deal," was all he said.

The game went on.

Betting proceeded cautiously for some time, though the turn of luck in Bob's favor continued to hold out. His money pile grew steadily as that of his antagonist diminished.

"Fifty on this hand," cried Bob, with a quick look at Roger. "See it if you have the nerve."

Roger, who had not yet examined his cards, picked up the hand and glanced at it.

He laid it down and took out his pocket-book. He carelessly counted a small package of bank-notes, and laid them on the table.

"I raise the bet to two hundred," he said.

Bob's eyes flashed. The lines on his face deepened. There was something of the haggard in his expression. Yet he did not hesitate. Grasping the heap of his winnings that lay before him, he dashed it into the center of the table.

"Three hundred better!" he exclaimed. "Cover it if you dare!"

The loud talk had attracted a group of spectators, who were gathered in a curious crowd around the players.

Not a feature changed in Roger's face. With quiet ease he took some more notes from his pocket-book, ran them over quickly between his fingers, and laid them lightly in the pool.

"I see your bet, and go five hundred better."

Bob started violently, and a hardly repressed curse hung upon his lips. There was a dangerous gleam upon his hard features.

"You are reaching too high for my pile," he said, with enforced ease. "You will have to cut your bet down within my reach."

"Your word is good for it."

"The devil it is!" was Bob's mental rejoinder. "Don't trust too much in that, my lad."

"You're a gentleman," he replied aloud. "I make the bet good on tick then."

He flung his cards, face upward, on the table, his eyes fixed on the countenance of his antagonist with a look of mingled anxiety and fierceness.

"There's my hand," he hoarsely said.

Roger's eyes fell coolly upon it. His face was impassive. No one could have told from his expression whether he had lost or won.

But there was a hard, fierce glare in the eyes which were so keenly riveted upon his face. Evidently the result of the bet was of deep moment to Bob Rockett. Some of the spectators took a step backward, as they marked his desperate expression.

CHAPTER II.

TWO GAMES OF CHANCE.

In a large, well-lighted room, on one of the fashionable avenues of upper New York, was seated a group of several persons, variously engaged in evening pursuits and amusements.

Some were occupied in reading, a well-filled book-case at one end of the room supplying plentiful material. One old lady was busily engaged in knitting. A young gentleman and lady had just concluded a game of chess, he having won with little difficulty.

She rose from the table with a gesture of assumed vexation.

"Don't say that you played fair," she laughingly exclaimed. "You have some secret way of cheating. Of course you could have had no chance in a fair game. But if you will cheat in that ridiculous fashion, what is a poor girl to do?"

"It was a double game, and a double victory," he replied, in a lower tone.

"What do you mean?" her bright glance flashed sharply upon him.

"I played with my hands. You with your eyes. We both won," his voice had almost sunk to a whisper. "If you will play so unfair a game, what is a poor man to do?"

The young lady turned her beautiful face toward him with a momentary bewilderment. Then a light laugh parted her coral lips.

"I declare, Paul," she cried, "you are decidedly improving. But you must excuse me. I cannot run the risk of having another arrow shot at me in that direct fashion."

She turned laughingly away. The young man bit his lip, as if to repress some emotion.

"What have you been doing, Grace?" asked a handsome middle-aged gentleman, as he closed the book he had been reading. "Not beating Paul again at chess, I hope?"

"Why I would, if he did not make moves that there is no warrant for in the books. Of course there is no credit in winning if a person wins against all the rules of the game."

"Oho! so that's the trouble? That will never

do, Paul, when you have young lady antagonists.—Where are you going?"

"Why you know I have an appointment with the Carsons, at nine."

"Yes, yes, I had forgotten. But come here a moment. I wish a word with you."

He led him to a window that looked out into the well-lighted street.

Grace's eyes followed the form of the tall, graceful young man with some interest. Paul had a clear, open, handsome face, with intelligence beaming in his blue eyes, and mingled kindness and energy on his well-shaped lips.

They were a couple who might well have felt a mutual interest, even if it were no deeper.

"What was it that you whispered me this evening, about young Rockett's returns?" asked the older gentleman, in a cautious tone. "Was he really short in his cash?"

"Yes. About five hundred dollars, I think. I had not time for a second examination, but will go over it carefully in the morning."

"Do so. I have my suspicions. Not but that he does his duty in his position. But I do not like the glare of that huge watch chain; and of his diamond rings and breast-pins."

"Oh mercy on us!" cried Grace. "Excuse me, papa, but you speak so loudly that one cannot help hearing you. But don't you know that glare and glitter, nowadays, are all outside? Diamonds are paste, and gold is gilding. That's all. A few dollars will give you a handful of gold chains, and of diamonds of the first water. Now don't say that I am meddling, for I do not know whom or what in the world you are talking about."

She moved lightly away.

"Come back, Grace," called her father. "It need be no secret from you."

"That is what one gets for the reputation of knowing how to keep a secret," replied Grace, as she returned with a gliding, dance-like movement. "Now I am to be repaid for my fortitude. What is the dreadful deed? Robbery, forgery, or murder?"

"What do you think of your young protege, Bob Rockett, as they call him at the bank?"

Her face instantly became grave.

"Why, I hope there is nothing wrong in regard to him. I should be very sorry to hear it."

"Not exactly wrong. It must be admitted, though, that there is a vein of bad blood in him, and that it has broken out more than once, both in his school and his bank life. Yet, generally, I have no reason to complain."

"I hope there may be no further escapades," she earnestly replied. "I can never forget that he saved my life. Is it his diamonds and chains of which you spoke?"

"Yes. I fear he is living beyond his means."

"But may they not be as I hinted, all counterfeit?"

"I hope he is not all counterfeit," was the grave reply. "However, Grace, it will not do to suspect the boy too readily. For your sake I will give him every chance."

"And a little good advice, if you suspect he is going into too great expense."

"Certainly. Well, I shall detain you no longer, Paul. It is time you were off."

"Then, sir, I must hasten. Good-evening."

He bowed deferentially to Grace, who returned his bow with a not overcordial nod.

Mr. Darling accompanied him to the door.

"Grace is wrapped up in her protege," he whispered. "Do you examine that account all the same?"

"I certainly shall."

Mr. Darling turned back, as Paul left the room. He looked for Grace, but she had already vanished by another door.

It was nearly the same hour as that in which we left Bob Rockett and Roger Glindon absorbed in their game of poker, at Harry Blake's gambling-hall.

The hand of cards which had been thrown face upward on the table, still lay, revealing their important secret.

"Four tens," remarked Roger, in his usual easy tone. "A prime hand, Bob. A chap who wouldn't bet heavily on a book like that isn't born for a poker player."

"Show up," cried Bob hoarsely, his face growing haggard with anxiety. "If your hand beats it, rake down the pool, and make an end of it."

"The pool is yours," replied Roger, quietly replacing his cards in the pack. "Your hand takes all the wind from mine. Pocket the cash, I say. You have won."

Two of the spectators who stood behind Roger, looked at each other significantly.

"Did you see?" whispered one to the other, with an expression of dismay.

"Yes," came in equally earnest tones from the other.

"Four queens!"

"Blow me if the pool wasn't his, and he's handed it over as if a thousand-dollar bet was a picayune! I'll swear, if it ain't the rottenest lot of cool playing I ever saw. There's a dead game somewhere behind it."

"Maybe he was mistaken in his hand."

"Not he. He is not that kind."

This whispering was masked by Bob's loud outburst of satisfaction, as he crammed the money into his pockets.

"There never was a run of luck that wouldn't turn if you follow it far enough," he ejaculated. "You had it all your own way at our last bout. To-night it's my turn. That's the way that fortune twists. Come, Roger, it's your deal—shut the papers."

"No more to-night. You have broken the bank," replied Roger, looking coolly into the excited face of his opponent.

"Well, then, I will stand treat. Let's make a night of it."

In a few minutes afterward they had left the gambling-hall and were out on the pavement. They walked on through the cool air of the streets, Bob's face flushed and heated, while he talked with a feverish gayety in strong contrast with the quiet tone of his companion.

Neither of them observed that the figure of a man had left the shelter of a dark alley near the door of the faro bank, and was tracking them cautiously as they moved through the shadowy streets. It was the man who had accosted Bob in Joe Cracker's saloon, and who had tracked him first to the gambling-hall, and was now following him again toward his next destination. A savage expression marked the dark face of the lurking scoundrel.

"Where shall it be?" asked Bob. "Shall we take a run through Clinton's Misery? Or, what do you say to the Blue Light Hall? There's always fun alive down there."

"There's too much money in your pocket," replied Roger. "They are not safe places for a man with his pockets lined with bank-notes."

"Trust me for that," replied Bob. "I am too old a bird to be easily trapped."

Roger stopped short in his walk.

"I think, my boy," he said, "that you have won back all your losses in our last game."

"Yes," replied Bob, staring at him.

"And, if I am not wrong, it was important for you to win it."

"What, in the devil's name, does that matter to you?" queried Bob, with an oath.

"Simply that it is my opinion that you had better go straight home, and put that money away safely. Then, if any of it is borrowed, you can repay it, which I fear you could not do after going through Clinton's or the Blue Light with that ballast aboard."

"Well, one would think you had bought me out and out, skin and bones," growled Bob.

"And another bit of advice," continued Roger in the same quiet tone. "Stop gambling. You are too excitable, too easily heated, for a successful player. Take my advice kindly, Bob, for I mean it in good part. And now, good-night. I have an appointment which I must keep."

Without another word he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving his companion lost in surprise, with which was mingled a growing anger.

"If I had your cash, I could be as cool as you, blast you!" he ejaculated. "And yet your advice is good, if it is given in such an infernal tone of superiority. But as for stopping gambling—I will think about it."

He walked slowly on, lost in deep musings, and utterly oblivious of the fact that he was followed step by step, the dark figure behind him gliding nearer on Roger Glindon's departure. A savage satisfaction showed on the face of the desperate-looking scoundrel. His hands were fiercely clenched as he glided on.

Leaving the comparatively wide and well-lighted street in which he was, Bob Rockett turned into a narrow, dark channel between the huge buildings that marked that quarter of the city. This dismal alley formed a short cut in his journey, and was as familiar to his feet as the pavement of Broadway itself.

But it added to the opportunities of the scoundrel. With a hiss of satisfaction he moved more quickly, though with the same noiseless tread as before. He seemed thoroughly practiced in the art of walking without leaving a sound of his footsteps audible. In a minute he was close behind the unconscious victim of his murderous intentions.

And now the light of a distant lamp gleamed.

with a sudden flash, on something that was clasped in his clenched hand. It was the blade of a knife or dagger. His eyes glared with a dull ferocity. The moments of the heedless traveler seemed numbered.

Still that cat-like progress continued. Now but a few feet separated the two men, the hand of the murderer was uplifted, his blade gleamed yet more keenly in the light.

It was a moment of supreme danger to Bob Rockett, who walked on utterly unconscious of peril. The villain crouched like a tiger ready to leap. A moment more and the career of that heedless man would have come to an untimely end, for as yet not a sound had reached his ears, occupied as he was in his own absorbing thoughts.

A spring forward; a sharp flash of the gleaming blade; an arm drawn back to plunge the murderous weapon into the heart of his victim! What now shall save Bob Rockett? What pitying genius? What fortunate accident? Hope seemed to have flown. The blade quivered as he was in his defenseless back.

It quivered and flashed, and the flash was reflected back from the glass window of an adjoining building. It arrested Bob's attention, and instantly his aroused senses caught a slight sound behind him. With a sudden sense of peril he sprang quickly forward, just in time to escape the murderous blade that at that instant descended, with savage vigor.

In a second Bob had turned, facing his antagonist. A single glance told him the nature of the impending peril. The bravado had recovered from his ineffectual blow and again raised his arm, with the glittering blade. But Bob Rockett was noted for the quickness of his movements and for his physical strength. He sprang like a flash on his antagonist, caught the uplifted arm in his strong grip, and with a sudden, powerful twist forced him to drop the knife, which fell with a clang to the pavement.

Bob forcibly turned the villain in's lowering face to the light, and bent his keen look upon it.

"Oh!" he cried. "I have caught an old bird it seems. So, my good friend, Rusty Mike; it is you, then, is it?"

CHAPTER III.

THE BANK OPENS FOR BUSINESS.

It was eight o'clock of a bright winter morning. Lower Broadway was alive with a ceaseless tide of human beings, coming and going, and all with an expression as if the destiny of the world depended upon the business they had in hand.

Among them came our friend of the previous night, Bob Rockett. There was a similar expression of anxiety upon his face, and he, too, walked as if he had the world's weight on his shoulders.

Yet this was not usual with him. He was ordinarily cheerful and inclined to lounge. Something had occurred to infect him with that fever of hurry with which the streets of New York are so deeply inoculated.

He turned from the current in front of a massive, brown-stone building, which lifted its heavy pediment far above the pavement. The door stood slightly ajar. He pushed it open and entered.

A man stood just inside the door, who turned to him with a look of surprise.

"Why, Mr. Rockett," he exclaimed, "what in the world has stirred you up so early this morning? You are a good half-hour ahead of your usual time. I think I shall have to make a mark in your favor."

"Don't, Jackson," replied Bob, with a forced laugh. "I won't sin that way often if I am forgiven this time. The fact is I was up late last night. Broached some champagne too. Didn't sleep worth a fig. When a chap has been buzzing in his head of a morning he is best out in the air."

"That's so," returned Jackson, looking at him curiously. "Though I thought that head of yours was of cast-iron, and could stand anything."

"Anything in reason, my boy. It won't stand sledging. Are any of the lads in the bank?"

"No. You are the early bird this morning. It is near Nelson's hour, though."

"Well, I will go in and look over my Clearing-House papers."

He walked back into the banking building, an expression of relief coming upon his features.

"Five minutes," he said to himself. "Five minutes, and the thing is done."

It was more than five minutes ere any other of the bank clerks entered. Then there came in a sharp-faced, grizzly-haired man, with a quick, nervous step.

Bob was seated on a chair in front of the bank counters, with his heels on the railing, busily engaged on the morning paper.

"Hello!" cried the new-comer. "I needn't ask you what is the news. It is news enough to see you here first in the morning."

"Don't mention it, Nelson," said Bob, with a wink. "Don't ruin my reputation. If the governor should hear it he would think I was going to the dogs, sure."

Nelson laughed and passed on.

Bob folded up his newspaper, and lounged out to the street door of the bank. Here he stood with his shoulder supported against the lintel, leisurely surveying the passing throng.

"I think I must take a settler for that champagne, Jackson," he remarked, as he stepped down into the street.

He was hardly lost in the crowd when Paul Essex ran up the steps in a brisk manner.

"Good-morning, Jackson," he cried to the old watchman, who stood at the door. "Any of the folk in?"

"Nobody but Nelson."

"And he would like to sleep in the bank, and take his meals there, if it could be made convenient," laughed Paul, walking briskly back.

The banking-room was a large apartment, with very high ceiling, and tall Gothic windows in the rear wall. A range of broad counters inclosed two sides of the room, fitted up with strong wire grating, through whose apertures could be seen great heaps of gold, silver, and bank-notes, which Nelson had just taken from the central safe, and poured out upon the counters as if he was dealing with so much wheat or corn.

"Hard at it, as usual," was Paul's cheerful greeting, as he entered the inclosure.

"Why, yes," replied Nelson, "I feel more at home here than in my boarding-house."

"You don't have the chink of gold there, by way of morning music," laughed Paul, as he commenced to turn over the pages of a huge book, which he had just taken from the safe.

Ten minutes afterward Bob Rockett re-entered. His small eyes fixed themselves sharply upon the two persons present, there being something menacing in the look with which he regarded Paul.

Without a word he seated himself at an interior desk, and commenced to rapidly run over a bundle of checks that lay before him. But thoughts far removed from the work before him were passing through his mind.

"I have settled three of you," he said grimly to himself. "Paul Essex, Roger Glindon, and Rusty Mike. It will be queer if I don't pull through all right. Roger is out of the ring; but for the other two—" his eyes glanced with a dark threat toward Paul, who was quite lost in the pages of the book before him.

In a few minutes more Bob gathered up his bundle of checks, put into his pocket a large sheet of paper covered with figures, and walked hastily from the bank.

"Which way?" asked a clerk he met entering.

"To the Clearing-House," he answered.

Paul looked around at the noise of his departure, but did not move from his book.

The minutes passed on. One by one the clerks lounged in. The hand of the great clock slowly glided around until it pointed to the hour of ten. Everybody was now at his desk, and wide awake for business; tellers, book-keepers, and clerks. The huge front doors opened with a clang. The Provident National Bank was ready for business.

Bob had long since returned from the Clearing-House. In a few minutes more he pushed into an inside pocket a large book well filled with drafts and other business documents, pressed his hat down firmly over his eyes, and again left the building on his daily round as bank runner for the Provident.

In a few minutes after he had gone Paul left the book over which he had been so intently engaged. There was a dubious expression upon his face as he crossed over to Bob Rockett's desk, which he opened and took out the books which Bob used in his occasional duty as assistant clerk.

He was soon lost in an intent examination of these. His head went lower and lower over the books, the look of doubt upon his face grew deeper, as he ran over page after page, footling up their entries on a paper at his side. Suddenly he stopped, with a puzzled look, running his fingers absently through his hair.

"Could I have made a mistake?" he asked himself. "I would not have thought it possible."

His eyes were intently fixed upon the footing

of his figures, something in which seemed to trouble him. He again counted them up. The result was the same as before.

Paul sat for full five minutes, staring absently upon the paper before him. Then he turned again to the book, carefully checking off the various entries.

He was interrupted in this by Mr. Darling, who had just entered the bank, and who laid a hand on Paul's shoulder, as he stepped up behind him.

The young man looked up into the earnest face at his shoulder. A nod of the head toward a door in the rear of the inclosure and Mr. Darling walked on. Paul continued his task for several minutes more. Then he laid down the pencil, more puzzled than ever, replaced the books in the desk, picked up the paper upon which he was calculating, and walked slowly to the door through which Mr. Darling had passed.

Upon it was the sign "Directors' Room." The apartment which Paul entered, on passing through this door, was small, but richly furnished, with soft, bright colored carpet, cushioned chairs, and a large table, with a top of Tennessee marble, in the center. The walls and ceilings were frescoed in warm colors, and the windows hung with soft curtains.

Mr. Darling was seated in a richly-carved arm-chair at the head of the table.

"Lock the door, Paul," he said.

Paul turned the key, and walked up to the table, a look of gratification replacing the puzzled expression which had so lately marked his face.

"Well, my boy, what is the result?" asked Mr. Darling.

"It is the oddest thing," replied Paul. "How I could ever have made such a blunder. But I must have done so. I have gone over the work twice, and here are the footings."

He spread the paper before Mr. Darling's eyes.

"This squares to the penny, Paul," remarked the latter, after examining it.

"That is what puzzles me," rejoined Paul. "I could have sworn that it failed to balance yesterday. And yet—you see."

"But the sharpest of us may make an error," answered Mr. Darling, with a look of relief. "I would rather than five hundred, or five thousand dollars, have it turn out so. I owe a debt of gratitude to the boy, and should be very sorry to have him cancel it himself, in any such manner."

"There are certain irregularities in his accounts," continued Paul, "which should not appear in any properly kept books."

"But he is far from having your methodical ways," laughed Mr. Darling. "I should think it odd indeed if the work of such a hap-hazard fellow was found in apple-pie order. The final footings are correct. That is the main thing."

"Yes, sir," replied Paul, dubiously.

"The boy has certainly good elements in him," continued the good-natured bank president. "He was such an unconscionable little vagabond when I first took him in hand. Just after he saved Grace's life, you remember. But he certainly made good progress at school, despite his many outbreaks against discipline. And look at him now, a regular fashionable in dress, well spoken, with good manners, and a shrewd business man."

"That is all true," responded Paul. "We both started from the same point, and came up together."

The banker stared.

"Hardly, Paul," he said. "As much as Rockett has improved himself, he had not your stuff in him to begin with, and I fancy he has not gained your level by a long reach. I am ever so much pleased, however, that your suspicions have proved misplaced. I hope yet to make something out of my rough diamond. Do not let me detain you any longer, Paul."

"I hope it may always turn out as it has to-day," replied Paul, as he unlocked the door.

"Good-morning, sir."

Some of the other clerks looked curiously at Paul as he walked out among them. His late interest over Bob Rockett's accounts, his interview with the president, all excited curiosity. But without a sign of attention to it Paul walked quietly to his desk.

Meanwhile the bank runner was passing rapidly from point to point through the streets, now plunging into some mercantile house, now darting into some bank, now springing into a car or a stage, for quicker transport to some distant locality.

The bundle of drafts in his book was dimin-

Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.

ishing, while they were being rapidly replaced with checks and money.

"Wouldn't I give something to see Paul Essex's face now?" he muttered to himself. "Blast him, he does not fancy that I discovered his meddling with my book yesterday! He would sell his soul to get me out of the bank. But, it's queer if I don't match him, sharp as he is. I've stolen a countermarch on him this time. But if I want to borrow funds again, I shall have to change my game."

He had just turned into a narrow street leading west from Chatham. There was a slouching, roughly-dressed chap before him. Bob brushed this fellow in passing, causing him to turn with a fierce oath.

"Drop that, Rusty Mike," and the young man faced him with a significant look. "I let you off cheap last night, my friend. But remember—"

The villain shrunk slightly back on seeing who stood before him.

"Blazes!" he ejaculated. "It's you ag'in, then?"

"There is no doubt of that, I fancy," replied Bob, sternly. "Now, see here, my man, what is it to be between us—war or peace? Take your choice, for I am open to either."

"What'll pay best?" asked Mike, with his usual oath.

"War won't pay you well. I promise you that." And Bob's eyes gleamed with defiance.

"Ef we jine hands, is ther' money in it?"

"There may be," replied Bob.

"Then I'm yer hose. True grit, to the shoulder."

"I will see you again," said Bob, hurriedly. "We must not be observed together."

The two strange confederates parted.

CHAPTER IV.

A CLOSE GAME OF TEN-PINS.

MORE than a month has passed since the date of our last chapter. Outwardly all has gone on well with our characters. Bob Rockett has taken good care that there shall be no more trouble in his accounts, but we could not safely say that he has reformed, or that he has lost his grudge against Paul Essex. Quietly as the latter had made his investigation there were not wanting persons ready to acquaint the suspected runner with what had taken place.

We find Bob Rockett now, in company with his friend, Roger Glindon, in a bowling saloon, under a Bowery hotel.

"You have been so deuced scarce of yourself for the last month," remarked Bob, as he took off his coat, "that I was not sure whether you had gone to Albany, or to the State's prison. Not much choice between the two, folks say. Well, which alley do you prefer?"

"Take the center," replied Roger. "It has a truer run."

He removed his coat, and taking up a small ball, sent it carelessly down the smooth boards, knocking the three corner pins from their base.

"Do you want to get the feel of the alley, Bob?"

"Oh no! my hand is in good practice."

The pins were replaced, and Bob picked up one of the largest of the balls, balancing it in hand as if it was a feather.

He was evidently very strong. The muscles of his arm swelled until the loose sleeve became tense with their pressure. Scarcely moving from where he stood he sent the huge ball whirling with such force down the alley that the pin-setters at the end sprung in alarm out of the way. It struck the center pin so truly and with such force as to carry it through, felling but half the remaining pins.

"A good center," said Roger, quietly. "But you are too strong, my boy. If you rip through at that rate your pins have no chance to fall. Do you take that as your first? Or is it only a feeler?"

"We had best begin the game afresh," replied Bob. "You take first ball. The challenged party has first choice of weapons, you know. But none of your rascally carelessness. If you want to beat me you will have to wake up."

Roger smiled, as he took his stand for the game.

He played with remarkable ease, selecting medium sized balls, and sending them down the alley with a slow curving roll that seemed to have hardly force enough to fell the pins. Yet nearly every shot made a center, and his score began to count up rapidly.

Bob, on the contrary, preferred the large balls, which he sent in straight lines, and with little less force than in his first shot. Yet, he

too, had a true eye and a skillful hand, and made a score that was but little short of that of his competitor.

The game went on with varying success—now one, now the other gaining the advantage. Roger kept his usual coolness and ease of manner, but his antagonist soon showed traces of excitement.

"By Jupiter, I've got you there!" cried Bob, as he made a brace of good shots and ran twenty points ahead.

Roger only smiled, but his next shot sent every pin into the gutter. This double spare was followed in the next shot by a spare, and in the succeeding one by a six-pin fall, giving him the game by six points.

"There's nothing sure till it is finished," he quietly remarked.

"Poh! that game was only a nerve-warmer," exclaimed Bob, with some show of spleen. "I'll go you a dead fifty, or a hundred, if you say the word, that I win the next game."

Roger looked at him curiously.

"You have not forgotten a word of friendly advice I gave you one night, about a month ago?" he asked.

"Oh, that be sunk! I'm not in leading-strings, Roger Glindon!" and Bob's tone had an angry ring. "I prefer to be the judge of the best way to spend my own money."

"Then you have gambled since?"

"Yes; if you are eager to know."

"But there is no use in shutting your eyes to facts, Bob. You cannot 'buck the tiger' against me. In gambling, as in war, the longest purse is sure to win in the end."

"Not against a Napoleon," returned Bob, with a nervous laugh. "I am not risking my money, for I can beat you at ten-pins. There's my fifty, if you dare cover it."

"All right. If you will have it. But keep your money in your pocket. We must not break the rules of the establishment. Shall we toss for first ball?"

"Yes."

Roger flirled a nickel into the air.

"Heads," cried Bob.

"Heads it is. You have won first shot."

Despite their quiet tones, the fact that there was a bet on the game had somehow made itself felt throughout the saloon, and several curious people gathered around to watch the game. Among these was a tall, thin fellow, dressed in a well-brushed suit of shabby black, and with an air of great gentility. His face was marked with a perpetual smirk of affected good-humor.

Bob played more carefully than before, sending his balls with less vigor, and sighting the pins closely before every shot.

But Roger made no change in his mode of playing. His light balls were flung with the same quickness and apparent heedlessness as before. Yet evidently he was a very skillful player, since nearly every ball took down the whole frame.

But his antagonist was equally successful. Spaces and double spaces were scored for each player, and the rapidly increasing game kept almost side by side.

"A good game!" cried Bob. "A hundred and sixty tie. But I've got six balls yet on this frame, and I'm in for a six-point lead."

"The chickens are not hatched yet," warned Roger. "Don't count them too soon."

"Here goes to break their eggs, then."

He hurled the ball as if from a catapult, but with more curve than he had intended. It twisted rapidly to the side of the alley, took the corner pin of the frame, and rolled uselessly into the gutter, adding but one point to his score.

"The poorest shot in the game," remarked a bystander. "Your wrist twisted on you, Mr. Rockett."

"Yes," replied Bob. "No matter. I lead one point, and there are six balls left. Take your shot, Roger."

The game was growing interesting. Twenty-four balls rolled out of the thirty, and the score one hundred and sixty to one hundred and sixty one. Roger balanced the ball in his hand, while his eyes rested with their usual cool expression upon the pins.

"Twenty to one that I make a ten-stroke," he said, as he sent the ball with his slow, curving line down the alley.

It took the center pin on the side, and the whole frame tumbled.

"A double spare!" cried the scorer.

"Here's its mate," exclaimed Bob, eying the pins critically, while he stood firm as marble, and flung the heavy ball with scarce a quiver in his limbs.

The bystanders looked at him with admiration.

tion. He was the picture of a young Hercules, with his broad shoulders, and the knotted muscles of his arms.

"Here's my double," he cried, as the pins tumbled in all directions, leaving a clean alley.

The next shots were made with equal skill, but not with equal success. Roger's ball took the whole of the pins, scoring him a space on the first frame, and a double space on the second, and running his score up to one hundred and ninety.

But Bob had poorer luck. The ball struck fairly, but the pins fell in that perverse way in which they sometimes will, leaving a single pin standing on a corner of the alley, with two fallen pins crossed in front of it, a most provoking specimen of dead wood.

A curse came in hissing tones through his clenched teeth.

"The game is lost," said the proprietor of the alley. "It will take a good ball to kick that dead wood away; for it lays so awkwardly that the chances are fifty to one against your making the pin."

Bob stood looking quietly at the ball, though his dilating nostrils showed his inner excitement.

"I will take the odds," he remarked. "Who wants to lay fifty to one?"

"That would be rather steep," replied the proprietor. "But I'll lay a ten-dollar bill against a one that you can't knock that pin with one ball."

"Done!" exclaimed Bob.

He turned to the trough and made a careful selection of one of the smallest balls, balancing it in his hand as if to gauge its weight.

"Look out there, boys," he called to the attendants at the end of the alley.

The lads darted like grasshoppers into the adjoining alleys, not liking to stand before a small ball in that vigorous hand.

"He will find that dead wood deuced awkward," whispered the proprietor.

"The only chance is for the ball to strike in between," answered Roger. "And that is not one in a hundred."

Bob stood erect, looking at the pin, and grasping the ball in his hand, while a grim smile came upon his face as he heard the whispering behind him.

"I will show them a new dodge in ten-pins," he said to himself.

He balanced himself lightly on his feet, the ball held easily at his side. Then, with a quick step forward, and a sharp send from his vigorous arm, the ball was sent whizzing toward the pin.

But not on the alley, as they had expected to see. On the contrary, it rose in the air, curving gracefully, and beginning to fall only as it neared the end of the alley.

All eyes were wide open with surprise, following the movement of the ball with intense interest. It flew onward, straight as a musket shot, the downward curve increasing, until finally it passed just above the fallen pins, and struck the erect pin with a force that sent it leaping six feet into the air.

"So much for your dead wood. I will take that ten," remarked Bob, turning to the proprietor.

"By the saints! you have earned it," replied the latter. "I never saw the like of that shot before."

Bob pushed the ten-dollar bill into his vest pocket with a look of quiet satisfaction.

"There's some things can be done as well as others," he remarked. "How now, Roger? The game is not yours yet, if you have got two balls to my one."

"I don't imagine that you have much chance against my spares," replied Roger, as he sent a ball with his usual careless manner down the alley.

It proved his most unlucky shot. It struck near the center, but the pins fell in such a way that a clear opening was made through the frame, only three pins falling, while the remainder stood in separate groups, four on one side and three on the other.

"Now how for my chances?" cried Bob, gleefully. "There's twenty-three on your first score, thirteen on your last. That's a hundred and ninety-six to my hundred and ninety-one, and I'll bet a cow you can't make more than four with your last ball."

He was evidently right. Only a lucky falling of the pins could reach from one group to another. Roger played his ball at the group of four, and swept them easily from the board, ending his frame, with three pins standing.

"Two hundred! and done!" exclaimed the proprietor. "A ten-stroke will win."

"And here it is," answered Bob, grasping one of the heaviest balls, and sending it rolling down the level alley, after a close observation of the pins.

It was the critical moment of the game. The slightest divergence to right or left might lose it, and as the ball rolled on it became evident that it was not going to be a center shot. The eyes of the player dilated. Much to him rested upon that ball, seemingly going astray.

It struck at one side of the center.

"Lost!" cried the proprietor.

"No, by hokey," cried the scorer. "See, how awkwardly the pins are tumbling!"

One pin reeled irresolutely for an instant as he spoke. All drew a long breath. It seemed as if it was going to stand. Then it toppled over backward, and in an instant all the remaining pins were carried with it; and the board was cleared.

"Two hundred and one! and game," cried the scorer.

"I'll be hanged if it wasn't a close nip, though!" ejaculated the proprietor.

"You've won, Bob," said Roger, coolly. "That flying shot did the work. Who the deuce can play against a fellow that makes a score through the air?"

He passed something quietly to Bob as they walked over to wash their hands. The latter put it, with a satisfied air, into his vest pocket.

"We are too well matched for any safe odds on either side," he remarked.

Meanwhile the tall, shabby-genteel fellow, who had been looking on at the game, took Bob's coat from the hook where it hung, and brought it to him just as he finished drying his hands.

"Excuse me, sir; but shall I help you on with your coat?" he asked, obsequiously. "That was neat play; neat play, sir."

"And if it was, I reckon I can put on my own coat," replied Bob.

"No offense, sir. No offense in the world, I hope. Why, certainly, if you prefer.—Oh! excuse my awkwardness. It's too blamed bad."

He had stumbled in handing Bob the coat, and fell heavily against him. The latter recoiled a step with the shock.

"Then the next time don't be so rascally offish," he grumbled. "I'm used to putting on my own clothes."

The fellow, still volubly excusing himself, backed off toward the door of the saloon, out of which he vanished.

"A confounded awkward rascal!" growled Bob, as he adjusted his coat. "What was he after, anyhow? Is he some sort of a genteel beggar?"

"Looks like it," answered Roger.

Bob thrust his fingers into his vest pocket, with the purpose of removing the money he had placed there. A blank look came over his face. The pocket was empty.

"By the Lord, I've been robbed!" he ejaculated. "That's what the chap was after. He's gone through me to the tune of a cool hundred and odd."

"The deuce you say," ejaculated the proprietor. "The infernal light-fingered bound. Let's after him. He cannot have got far."

"No, no," replied Bob. "We may as well save our legs. He's too old a bird for that."

He stood silent for a moment, his face full of thought.

"Ahl by all that's good, I know him now! I thought I had seen that face. It's Beau Bink, the dandy pickpocket. I know just where to put my hand on him."

CHAPTER V.

THREE TO A BARGAIN.

"I'm just the infernallest mean season that ever was kicked up ag'in' a poor devil. Six solid years in good, and all 'cause a chap didn't stop a woman's breathin' uptratus; and then to find business as flat as a buckwheat cake. Why, blame it all, I'd sooner be back in a cell. A feller gits his reg'lar meals there 'thout trouble; and that's somethin'."

The speaker was Rusty Mike. He sat on a dilapidated chair, which looked as if it had taken part in a faction fight. His heels were elevated upon a table, in no better condition than the chair, for one leg was gone, and was replaced by an upright wooden box, with a brick to fill out in length.

The coat was off, and his sleeves rolled up to the elbows, showing sun-browned, brawny arms. Between his teeth he held a short clay pipe, whose original color had long since disappeared under a grimy coating. Near him sat a buxom

woman, her dress as slovenly as her habitation, though her face showed traces of former beauty.

"You talk as if you was sorry you didn't finish the woman," she replied.

"I wouldn't been jugged if I had," he coolly answered. "Not as I had any spite ag'in' the creature; but ther'd been a different tune to whistle only fur that little bound of a Bob, as snatched her from the fishes. Do you know, Sal, that he's got to be a fine gentleman now, highly edicated, and runnin' a bank, or some sich conniption."

"You don't tell me that?" replied the woman, her eyes lighting up. "But who has done that for him? Her father?"

"I s'pose," and Mike sent out a cloud of smoke.

"I always prophesied he'd make a thief," she continued. "A banker ain't much better maybe, Mike, but it's safer. I wish to Heaven you had some better business."

"Oh, that be fizzled!" cried Mike, in a tone of disgust. "If I'd go inter honest bizness I wouldn't be fit for nothin' but ditchin' or the like. And that wouldn't suit my constertion."

"They don't send folks to prison for ditching," she quietly answered.

"That's so, Sal," with a wry face. "And see here, old gal; it were derned good in you to wait fur me them six years. I 'spected you'd took up with some other chap, years ago."

"I ain't that kind, Mike," she answered, in an offended tone.

"You ain't, Sal; you ain't." He passed his rough hand over her hair, with a caressing movement. "You're true grit, old gal. I won't forget it soon.—But, shoot it all, business is thundrin' dull."

Mike dropped his chin on his palms, in an attitude of reflection, while slow wreaths of smoke came successively from his lips, and curled upward into the air, like the shadows of his fleeting thoughts.

The door opened and a face looked cautiously into the room. The foxy eyes, the lank cheeks, and smirking mouth, indicated Beau Bink, the pickpocket.

"Any company, Sal?" he asked.

"Nobody but Mike. And he's gettin' to be sort of familiar again."

"Come in, you long-shanked fence-rail! What the blazes are you hangin' there about?" roared Mike. "Come in, you half-cocked dandy, and let's see what tailor's rig you're swingin' now."

Beau drew his lank form into the room, with his habitual cautious movement, and closed the door carefully after him.

"Take a seat, Beau. There's one, a-top that barrel. Have a pipe?"

"Don't keer if I do, bein' it's you."

In a minute more he was adding his quota of smoke to Mike's.

"Any luck?" asked Mike, carelessly.

"Oh, hain't I! You'd better think it."

Mike looked up with new interest. There was a tone of intense self-satisfaction in Beau's words that arrested his attention.

"Hello! Struck a bonanza, hey?"

"Hit a gold mine," answered Beau. "And you never seen such a neat bit of work got in. Look there, my covey!"

He drew some bank-bills from his pocket and spread them out on the table.

"By the blue blazes!" ejaculated Mike. "Two fifties and a ten! Why, I've cracked a crib fer less than that. And this long-legged spider had only to slip his fingers in some fool's pocket! Lend us a fifty, Beau. I'm clear cleaned out."

"Why, I wouldn't mind, Mike, fer I know you're true grit. And it ain't the game fer us chaps to salt one another. Honor among thieves, you know. If I didn't trust you to the backbone I wouldn't never shell out here on the table. Only—"

"Only what?" asked Mike.

"Only that it takes three to make that sort of a bargain," came in clear tones, from behind.

A large, white muscular hand suddenly intruded between them, and laid itself upon the money.

The three occupants of the room had been so intent upon Beau's spoils as to hear no cautious movement behind them. Their first knowledge of an addition to their company came from this strange voice, and the apparition of that white hand.

"Blazes!" cried Mike, attempting to rise. But his chair had been so pushed back on its two rear legs that it toppled over in the effort, sending him headlong to the floor, while the pipe was driven half down his throat, choking him with its volume of smoke.

Beau was equally unfortunate. One glance

at the new-comer, and he backed off his barrel so quickly that he, too, rolled on the floor, his face pale, and his eyes dilated with fright.

And they were not without reason for alarm. For there stood Rob Rockett, his sturdy form erect, his left hand covering the stolen money, his right grasping a pistol, while his face turned with a stern look from one to the other of the baffled villains.

"Hands off!" cried Sal, the most self-possessed of the party. "Who are you?"

"The owner of this little stake," replied Bob, coolly, as he grasped the money and thrust it into his pocket.

He withdrew a step from the table, warily watching his foes, who were just picking themselves up from the floor.

But they were in no condition or humor to assault the intruder. Mike was in a paroxysm of coughing, while Beau backed off as if he had seen a ghost.

"Who are you?" cried Sal, in a furious tone.

"You're a sharp chap, maybe; but you've put your nose in a wolf's den and won't get it out again so easily. Plunder comes in here, my cove. It don't go out."

She had backed up against the door, and stood facing him, her large frame seeming no mean match in strength for any ordinary man.

"You don't know me them, Sal Crapper? You've forgotten your old friend, little Bob Rockett, as you used to call me? There's one thing you can bet high on; that an old hunter don't put his nose in a wolf's den without leaving a track open behind him. Back off, Mike! None of that game!"

Rusty Mike had got over his fit of coughing, and was advancing fiercely on his foe, a long-barreled pistol in his hand.

"Down with your little popgun!" roared Mike, fiercely. "A man's house is his castle, Bob Rockett. You won't git out here as blamed easy as you got in, blast your impudence!"

Beau, too, had recovered from his momentary terror, and was advancing with a threatening expression.

It was no agreeable situation, for one man to be matched against three such foes. Bob backed up against the wall, and cocked his pistol, as he eyed them warily.

They came closer, a dark look upon Mike's face.

"Drop that plunder, now, or I'll bore you, sure!"

"And blow me if I don't carve you!" Beau held an ugly knife in his left hand.

"If you want to get out of here alive, Bob Rockett, you'll fork over and slide," added Sal, in the same threatening tone.

A light laugh broke from Bob's lips. His pistol took an uncomfortably sure aim at Mike's head.

"Don't lift your pistol-hand, Mike Crapper. It might pro' be dangerous. What's more, my jovial friend, you take me for some green countryman. — you do I'll be glad to inform you that I've had my eye teeth cut. There's some friends waiting for me below. If you want to see the uniform of our Metropolitan police just crack a cap in this room, and you'll not be long without a visit. Bob Rockett wasn't brought up in Thieves' Paradise without getting some few points of useful education."

The villains halted, with baffled looks. What their opponent had said was very probable. And Mike had no anxious desire, just then, for a domiciliary visit from the police.

"I'll tell you what it is," said Bob, coolly lowering his pistol, walking across the floor, and seating himself on Mike's lately vacated chair, "these funds are mine and I intend to hold on to them. But if you two chaps have any notion of making a clean fifty I'll put you on the track for it."

The two thieves looked at each other.

"Put up your weapons now," said Bob, depositing his pistol in his pocket, but not removing his hand from it. "Shooting and carving is not the business on the carpet. It's finances. Say the word. Are you on the make?"

"By the hounds, yes!" answered Mike. "Let out! I'm your man, if it's in reason."

A long conference ensued between the three men. It ended in a compact being formed between them, by performing which the two thieves were to gain one of the fifty-dollar bills which Bob had so boldly recovered from their clutches.

It had been an hour since he entered the room. He walked to the door with a careless step, though any sharp observer would have seen that he was on the alert against the movements of his new confederates. He was not verdant enough to trust them.

"I fancy my friends below will be tired waiting," he said, in his easy tone.

"Good-by; and remember," he continued, walking from the room.

The two thieves looked significantly at each other.

"What do you think, Mike?"

"He thinks he's darned smart," replied Mike. "But, maybe he's playin' with fire. I ain't goin' to be satisfied with a fifty fer this job if there's more in the wind. And anyhow I'll have a ring in Bob Rockett's nose as I'll make him queal yet."

"I'm yer hoss," answered Beau, savagely. "It's too outrageous thin, arter a chap's made a stake in the way of trade, for a feller to step in and grab his honest 'arnings that way. I'm in heavy for any game to get level."

And Beau looked like the very picture of injured innocence and uprightness.

But the reader must accompany us for several days forward in time, and to a point very different from that of the scene just described.

In a rich mansion in one of the most aristocratic avenues in the city, a lady of middle age was seated in a richly furnished apartment. She had been pretty in her youth, and was still in possession of much of her former good looks. She had just risen, her silken attire rustling as she did so, to greet a young lady on the point of entering the room.

She looked somewhat doubtfully at the visitor.

"Excuse me," said the latter, rather confusedly. "But it was Miss Masson I asked to see. You are—"

"Mrs. Glindon, at your service. Is it not Mrs. Delorme whom I have the honor to see?"

"That is my name," replied the visitor, gracefully advancing.

"Then pray be seated. I will go look for my niece. She is in her room, probably."

"But do not let me disturb her. She may be engaged. I only intended a short call."

"It will be no inconvenience whatever, I assure you."

The lady swept gracefully from the room, leaving the visitor, who was no other than the young lady whom we have already met as the daughter of Mr. Darling, quietly waiting.

She had just been greeted as Mrs. Delorme, and the reader may remember that, in a former story, Grace Darling was married to George Delorme. Yet she now appears as a youthful widow. The fact is that George Delorme, having occasion to make a business trip to the south-west shortly after their marriage, had been seized with the yellow fever then prevailing in that locality, and had died there. The case was so bad a one, in fact, that all his clothes and belongings had necessarily been destroyed, and the poor wife had nothing but the testimony of the physician in assurance of his death, and her memory of him as souvenir of his life.

Yet she had recovered from her grief, and was now more beautiful, and apparently as young as on the day of her wedding.

The door opened almost immediately after the old lady had gone out. A young man looked into the apartment. He was on the point of withdrawing again on seeing that it was occupied. But the next instant his face lit up with a flash of recognition, and he walked into the room.

It was Roger Glindon, the self-possessed friend of Bob Rockett.

"Mrs. Delorme!" he cried, in a pleased tone. "This is an unexpected pleasure. I am ever so glad to meet you."

He walked forward with extended hand. She rose from her chair, a faint flush marking her face, and took his proffered hand.

"I certainly did not expect the pleasure of meeting you," she said. "I thought you were always engaged in business at this hour of the day."

"Business troubles me little," he laughingly responded. "And I am certainly glad that I escaped from it to-day, since it has given me the opportunity of meeting you. You have not forgotten our last interview?"

"How could I forget it?" Her voice had a deep, serious tone.

"And you received my letter?"

He spoke hastily, and with an excitement of some unusual with him.

"I did." She had grown cold in manner.

"I hardly hoped for an answer in person. But, Mrs. Delorme; or Grace, if I may use that dear name; since we have thus met, may I not hope—may I not trust—"

His face was flushed, his tone excited. He seized her hand in his. She withdrew it from his grasp.

"Excuse me, Mr. Glindon. This is not the place, nor the time for—I shall answer by letter," she hastily resumed, as she heard the door open to her left.

Roger's quick eye caught the open door, and the figure of his mother and cousin standing there.

"To-morrow, then, if you are disengaged. I shall call at three, for a drive to the park. Ah, mother, are you here? I have been trying to entertain Mrs. Delorme in your absence. I must beg you to excuse me now. I have business to attend to, and must be going."

There was a dark look upon his face, as he left the room.

CHAPTER VI.

PLANS AND COUNTERPLANS.

ABOUT one o'clock of the next day Roger Glindon was seated in the newspaper room of the Lotus Club, apparently reading the *Times*, yet really with his eyes fixed reflectively upon the window.

"Her manner wasn't dreadfully encouraging," he mused. "But then there's no trusting a woman's moods. It might all have been a bait to hook me tighter. And again it might—But, hang it, she's not the sort of girl to go fishing for a lover."

"A note for you, sir," said a waiter at his elbow.

"Eh? Oh, yes, I see. Any answer wanted, Jackson?"

"No, sir. It's a mail letter."

Roger picked up the dainty envelope from the silver salver on which it was presented, his brows contracting as he did so.

"It's hers," was his mental comment. "There's destiny in it."

"Ha! my boy! So that's the sort of rose-scented misses we're getting, eh?" cried a jovial friend who was passing.

"Yes," replied Roger, laughingly. "I'm overwhelmed with them. They just rain on me. But, what can one do? That's the penalty for being agreeable to the ladies."

"I hope it don't prove a tailor's bill," retorted his friend. "There's no trick our smart scissors-snippers are not up to nowadays."

"But, unfortunately, I have been green enough to pay for my last coat. So there is no hope of escape in that direction."

His friend laughed and went on.

The gay smile left Roger's face.

"I half wish it was as Jack hints," he said. "I fear it is tenfold worse."

He deftly opened the scented envelope, and extracted the dainty sheet it inclosed.

His brows knitted as he cast his eyes over its contents.

"Fate in five lines," he muttered. "So it is all up then; she cuts loose."

He read the note again. It ran as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND:

"I would gladly have escaped the painful necessity of writing these words, if possible. Yet I cannot return your proffered love, and hope you will not take it ill that I plainly say so. I trust you will learn to forget me as a lover, but not as a friend."

"Truly Yours,

"GRACE DELORME."

"That is easily said," he muttered, crushing the letter in his hand. "But it will not be so easily done. I know what lies in my way, Grace Delorme. I am not quite blind to the truth. And there are more ways than one of removing an obstacle. Ah! what a sensation there would be if they all knew a certain fact of which I happen to be aware. But I am not doit enough to shoot my arrows until the game is within easy reach."

He crushed his hat upon his head, and left the room, his handsome face growing dark and stern. In a few minutes more he was walking down Broadway, at a pace as if his nervous excitement could only be overcome by vigorous exercise.

Cool as Roger Glindon was usually, the matter seemed to arouse him to an unwonted mental unrest.

"They cannot conceal it from me," he said to himself. "Paul Essex is my favored rival. But there are ways and means of removing him from my path, and if I am not much mistaken, Bob Rockett is the chap to help me."

A half hour afterward he met Bob, who was driving along, in his usual swift way, on his daily rounds.

"A minute, Bob," he called out, tapping his friend on the shoulder.

"Make it a short one then," answered Bob. "It's getting late, and I have had a heavy day."

"Step in here, out of the rush."

"No time for ten-pius now," answered Bob, with a laugh. "I must get through with bowling trade-dollars, and double eagles, before I go to the balls. What is wrong, Roger?"

They had stepped into a beer saloon, and stood by the window, busily talking.

Both became grave and earnest in face as the conversation went on.

"I must go now," remarked Bob, after several minutes had elapsed. "But I am your man. I owe him a grudge of the worst kind. Trust me to fall in with any plan you may devise."

A look of malignity came upon his sinister face.

"Won't you take a beer, Bob?"

"No. Not during business hours."

"Have a cigar then. Our German friend yonder looks as if he would arrest us for highway robbery, if we go out without patronizing his bar."

Ten minutes after this brief interview Bob Rockett had reached in his rounds a point several blocks away. He was now in Beaver street, and was making his way rapidly toward the bank.

But his quick eyes caught sight of a face peering out from a corner not far in advance. A slight start marked his recognition of Beau Bink.

"By Jupiter! I half forgot that little game," he muttered. "There's bigger fish afloat now. That net must be taken up, and a surer one laid."

He gave a peculiar whistle. Beau stepped out from his corner, and walked toward him, waving his handkerchief with a marked affectation of grace. His hat was set jauntily upon one side of his head, and he presented a comical picture of the shabby-genteel exquisite.

Bob turned and walked carelessly by his side with an appearance of not knowing him. He spoke in a low tone, looking steadily away from the man beside him.

"It won't work. The game's off," he remarked. "I have bigger fish to fry."

"Off?" exclaimed Beau.

"Yes. I may have work for you, though. You shall earn your stake. But you had best slide on now. It is not safe for us to be seen in company."

"But that's too decided thin," answered Beau angrily. "Pass over the plunder now, and it's square. We ain't the sort to play no off and on game with."

"You will get it when you earn it."

"Didn't I earn it? You got it by your trade, with a ten-pin ball. And I got it by my trade, with my ten fingers. You robbed me, Bob Rockett, and there's no use a-denyin' it."

"Travel," said Bob, impatiently. "I will see you at the old place. Slide now."

He turned on his heel, and walked away, leaving Beau, whose eyes followed him with an angry glance.

The street was not thickly occupied, though a number of persons were passing. One among these gripped Beau's arm with a vigor that made him leap suddenly around.

"Oh, shoot it!" he cried. "What's up now? I ain't been and done—Why devil take it, Rusty Mike, is it you? Blame me, if I didn't think it was a policeman! You've got such an uncomfortable official grip."

"What's up?" asked Mike. "I seen you quizzin' him."

"The game's off."

"Off? And no money?"

"Not till we 'arn it in some other way."

"That he fizzled!" roared Mike. "I wonder what sort of weather-cocks he thinks he's dealin' in? Come this way, Beau. It's a bit too public here for a interview between gents that's on the shady."

They walked toward a more retired locality, busily conversing as they did so.

"I tell you, pal," announced Mike, after a safer point had been reached. "He's set us on the track himself. Teached us the whole biz, the blarsted fool! It's a useful bit of eddication, Beau, and blame me if I's a-goin' to be put off with no half-weaned chance of makin' a fifty arter a while. I ain't that sort."

"There's my hand on it, Mike. If you kin kick up any safe game count me in."

"Safe! Why, blast him, he dasen't kick. We've got him under our thumbs, my cove. And I'll be shot if I don't put on the screws. I don't keer how loud he squeals."

Three days after the date of the above conversation found Bob Rockett engaged in his daily and unvarying round of occupation.

He had made one return to the bank, and was starting out on a fresh round.

"Here's a thousand dollar draft on Bense...

"Koons & Co.," he remarked, walking into the cashier's office. "What shall I do with that, Mr. Spicer? They gave us some trouble the last time, you remember."

The cashier scratched the bald spot on his head with the pen.

"I guess they are sound, Robert."

"Shall I take their check, then, if they offer it? Or leave them a notice to call here and pay the draft?"

"I hardly know. It's a responsibility. Don't want to offend them. You might take their check, and draw the money on it at once at their bank. I judge that will be safe. They must keep some running balance."

"All right, sir," answered Bob, leaving the room. "Hang me if he'll take the responsibility of a cat with a mouse," he continued. "But they are not going to bring me into blame, if anything is rotten in the Benson firm. There's nothing like having authority from head-quarters."

He went on from bank to bank, and from one business house to another, rapidly paying and receiving, and emptying his book of drafts and cash on one hand as he replaced it on the other.

But Bob Rockett was too cautious a bank runner to carry any large sum of money in his book. An effort had been made once before to rob him, and since then he had always taken the precaution to remove all large sums of money to an inner pocket. A thief would usually have got but little by the theft of his runner's book.

"A draft for one thousand, Mr. Benson."

He was now in a large coffee warehouse on a prominent business street.

"Yes. Oh, yes! Carlin & Co.? Don't know about this, my young friend. There's some little error in that bill."

"Very well, sir. Shall I return the draft with that answer?"

"No. Oh, no! Certainly not. It's a good house. They'll make it right. But still, I hardly know if I should—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Benson. I have no time to spare. I will leave you a notice of this draft, and you can call at the bank and pay it."

"No, no, no! You are too hasty, young man. I presume it is all right. I will write you out a check for the amount."

Bob waited impatiently while the slow-motioned old man wrote the check. With the multitude of places he had to visit daily, five minutes to each was all the time he could afford, and he was often obliged to be curt in order to stir up a slow-moving customer.

"He's enough to give a crocodile the brain fever," grumbled Bob, on again reaching the street. "A person might think that old Benson was a Chinese mandarin, instead of a New York merchant, by the way he moves. I must slip 'round to the bank and get the cash on this check. I wouldn't like to give that firm more than two or three hours' grace."

This money Bob put in his book. He would be back at his own bank in less than half an hour, and there was not likely to be any danger in that short period.

Yet half an hour is long enough for a host of dangers, a fact which he was destined to discover.

He had just turned into a street a little out of the rush of business—a quiet avenue with but few people visible in it. The only person he particularly observed was a chap dressed as a sailor, and disfigured by an enormous wen over his eye. He was singing in a boarish voice and flourishing a handful of ballads.

Bob paused to look at him as he came near. There was something familiar to him in the man's countenance. He had certainly seen him in another character, and in no creditable locality.

The fellow was evidently intoxicated. He reeled as he came up. In seeking to recover himself he lurched heavily against Bob, almost knocking him from his footing.

"The devil take you!" cried Bob, pushing him back. "Hold your level, you drunken vagabond!"

"Don't you hit me!" roared the fellow, in a maudlin tone, pawing at Bob with a ludicrous show of sparring.

He reeled and grasped the coat of the young man to support himself. Bob tried to tear himself loose, but the drunken grip was a strong one.

"Blame me if I don't give the fool a settler."

Bob drew back his powerful arm, his face red with anger. In a moment more his fist would have been driven into the face of the drunken sailor. But at that instant his arm was caught from behind in a strong grip. His other arm

was grasped at the same time. Simultaneously a face appeared before him which he recognized as that of Beau Bink, and the alert fingers of this adroit pickpocket slipped the book from the inside pocket of his coat, which was held conveniently open by the sailor.

The next moment he received a powerful surge from the two men who held him, so sudden and violent as to precipitate him upon the rough stones of the street. His assailants instantly took to flight.

The whole affair had passed so quickly that it was over by the time any one in the street had observed it.

But Bob instantly scrambled to his feet, yelling for help at the top of his voice. He caught a glimpse of three men just disappearing into the adjoining street, and recognized the third as Rusty Mike.

He started in instant pursuit, joined by the persons nearest him.

"Have you lost much?" asked one of those nearest him.

"Over fifteen hundred dollars," cried Bob, breathlessly. "Stop thief! stop thief!"

They had reached the adjoining street, which was more thronged. The three men were visible, about half a block in advance. Dozens of men put themselves in pursuit. The chase became sharp and fierce, the crowd constantly augmenting. But suddenly it was discovered that there were only two men in flight. One had disappeared.

"Stop thief! Stop thief!" came in an augmenting roll. The whole street seemed alive.

"Hold up there, my lovelies," cried a policeman, rushing out in front of the two fugitives. "Hold up, or I'll bust your heads for you."

They attempted to run past him, and he was as good as his word, giving Beau Bink a tap with his club that sent that worthy prostrate to the pavement.

At the same time Mike was surrounded and captured by a half-dozen men, who had taken the alarm, and barred his passage.

"What is the matter here? Who has been robbed?" asked the officer.

"I," answered Bob, as he came up. "Search them. My bank-book must be on one of them."

The search was made, but no book found. It had evidently vanished with the drunken sailor, who had so shrewdly slipped into some open doorway out of the chase.

CHAPTER VII. AFTER THE ROBBERY.

An evening paper, in giving a highly-colored account of the robbery, did not fail to hint that the unlucky bank runner knew more of the robbers than was consistent with his honesty. But then that is nothing new. Some evening or morning paper is sure to have similar hints in all similar cases, and the less they know about the matter the more positive they always are. The first idea of many good souls is to imagine that every unfortunate poor devil is, of course, a rascal.

Yet such an idea was not entertained at the bank. Or, if so, it was kept in the background.

"It is a very unfortunate affair, Robert," said Mr. Darling, very gravely. "You should have had a chain to your book."

"So I have told Mr. Spicer," was the answer. "But if the bank does not provide the chain, I cannot be expected to buy it myself."

"Very true. Very true. Spicer should have seen to it. A whole store-house of chains could have been bought for—fifteen hundred, was it not?"

"Fifteen hundred and thirty-seven dollars, twenty-eight cents," replied Bob. "Besides some ten thousand or so in checks. Of course the checks will be of no use to the robbers."

"And was that all your day's cash collection?" asked Mr. Darling, looking at him closely.

"I fancy not," replied Bob, with a short laugh. "I had turned in over seven thousand to the bank. And I had three thousand more in my pockets. I take care to not carry much in my book. But, then, it is not convenient to empty it every five minutes."

"No, certainly not."

Mr. Darling sat silent for a minute, intently regarding Bob, who stood in an easy attitude before him. He then pushed over to him a newspaper which lay on the table, placing his finger on a marked passage.

"Read that," he said. "Bob cast his eyes over it, a flush coming into his cheek.

"Well?" asked Mr. Darling, quietly.

"The libel law should give a man the privilege

of kicking such an editor out of a third-story window," rejoined Bob. "If I had been leagued with these robbers the bank might easily have been three thousand more out of pocket. Or ten thousand, for that matter."

"Very true; very true, Robert. I don't suspect you of anything wrong. And I doubt if anybody else does who knows the circumstances. You were not hurt, my poor fellow?"

"Bruised a little. That is all. I found cobble-stones rather harder than feathers."

"And, Robert; excuse me for what I am going to say. But you knew many of the dangerous classes in your boyhood?"

"Yes, some of them."

"Very well. Did you recognize any of these robbers?"

"They are strangers to me, sir," replied Bob, with a look of deep innocence.

"But are you sure? Did you observe them closely?"

"Yes, the two that were caught. Never saw the rascals before," he answered, lying with an easy grace. "The chap that got off with the money had something familiar about him; but I can't think where to place him."

Mr. Darling leaned back in his easy-chair, with his eyes fixed upon the young man's face in a manner that made him somewhat uneasy. What did this peculiar scrutiny mean?

He remained thus for two or three minutes, his fingers drumming in an absent manner on the table. The situation became intensely disagreeable to Bob. He broke out at length.

"You believe that rascally paper, then?"

"Patience, my boy. I am only thinking—Then you are quite sure that you do not know these two men?"

"Know them? Certainly not."

"They claim to know you."

"The devil they do! Excuse me, sir, but you started me. They know me!"

"And further, they declare that this robbery was a preconcerted plan. That you engaged them to do it, and agreed to divide the spoils with them."

It would have been difficult to read the expression of Bob's face at that moment. He flushed red and white. A cold sweat stood upon his forehead. He drew up a chair and seated himself. Mr. Darling's eyes regarded him curiously.

"And you believe them?" asked Bob, with a recovery of his self-possession.

"I have not said that. But they offer to furnish proofs and witnesses."

"Very well," replied Bob, calmly. "And I presume I may furnish proofs and witnesses also?"

"Certainly."

"My proofs are, then, that if I had been a party to this robbery the spoils would have been more than a paltry fifteen hundred dollars. In the second place I would have hugged the street rather longer, instead of having these men chased and captured. My witnesses are the persons who took part in the pursuit."

"You are right, Robert," said Mr. Darling, rising from his seat, and holding out his hand to the young man. "I did not for a moment believe them, but wished to see how you would take this accusation. The bare word of a crew of villains is not proof against faithful servitude, and creditable evidence. You will continue in your position in the bank."

Bob breathed hard on finding himself in the street again, and free from this inquisition. That he was not safe he well knew. Mr. Darling's confidence in him might not be shared by the public. The prisoners, so far, had only made a statement. They might bring some proof of it. There was Sal, Rusty Mike's wife, who knew of the plan, and he might have been seen by others in that locality. Something must be done, and at once. They must be frightened off or bought off.

Bought off? But where was the money to buy them? Bob had a little of his own. He was in the bad habit of living close to his income. If he could recover the stolen funds now. Who was the drunken sailor with the men, whose face seemed so familiar to him?

He set himself to thinking. But his reflections upon this point were soon interrupted by a light touch upon the shoulder. He turned sharply around. There stood the form of his sporting friend, Roger Glindon.

"Just heard of that accident, Bob," said the latter. "Step in here; a glass of ale will do you good. I want to talk that affair over with you. Deuced shrewd in you, if we are to believe the papers."

"I'd like to punch that editor's head," replied Bob. "And don't know but I will yet."

"This table. It is private and confidential, and that is what I want now.—Two glasses of your best Philadelphia brew," to the waiter. "Was it, or was it not, a set thing, Bob? Come, you may be square up with me. I have an inkling of a plan in view."

"Set? No! Blast their light fingers!"

The waiter at this moment brought the foaming beverage. They were silent until he had gone again. Then Roger took a sip from his glass, and, setting it down again, leaned back and fixed his eyes steadily upon Bob.

"My plan concerns Paul Essex."

"The deuce!" exclaimed Bob, his face suddenly lighting up. "I'm your man, then."

"That fellow is in my way."

"And mine. I owe him a grudge."

"I have nothing personal against him. But we are in pursuit of the same woman. You understand."

"I'd be thick-headed if I didn't."

"It would do no good to break his leg, or any such trifling accident. That would only add pity to love. But if I break his honor, make him disgraceful. How then?"

He coolly took a long draught of the ale, while he waited Bob's reply.

"I see. But how? And what has that to do with my adventure?"

"Do you know these two robbers?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me, Bob. You do. What's more, they claim that the robbery was a set thing; a scheme of your own. I am posted, you see."

"By Jove, you are. I give in, then. I know them. But the rest is a lie. Why hang it, man! I wouldn't be flourishing an empty pocket at this minute, if I had played a game like that."

"It was a set thing, Bob." There was a sinister gleam in Roger's eyes as he spoke.

"It was, eh?"

"Yes. With Paul Essex."

He looked steadily and meaningfully at his companion.

"Hal! By the Lord, I begin to see."

"Will money buy these men?"

"You bet. Body and soul."

"It's a clear game, then. You shall have your revenge, and I my clear field. I shall not spare money, I promise you. But there are others to buy. We must leave no loophole open."

"There is Rusty Mike's wife," remarked Bob.

"Secure her then. Find her price. I will be paymaster. And who is the third man in this robbery? The one who escaped?"

"That is what I cannot tell you."

"You must find out. I will try and discover from the prisoners. But do you try too. I may fail. You may succeed."

Bob sat silent for some moments.

"I will try," he then said. "I have an idea."

Bob's idea was not a bad one. An hour afterward found him in a disreputable locality on the East River side of New York. The night was a cold one, and he shivered as a chill river wind swept up the narrow street, although he was closely enveloped in a thick beaver overcoat.

"This must be the den," he surmised. "I am glad of it, too, for I want to get out of this frosty air."

The place which he now entered was a low drinking saloon, fitted up with some slight effort at smartness in its row of decanters with variously tinted liquors, but otherwise having a dilapidated and low-down look.

A number of boozy individuals were present, the most of them gathered around a table where two of the party were intent upon a game of dominoes, over which enough oaths were split to furnish a small-sized Pandemonium.

Behind the bar stood a raw-boned, hard-faced fellow, with the red sleeves of his shirt rolled up to the elbow. He looked the very picture of a bruiser.

There was a stare of surprise from all sides on Bob's entrance to the den. He was not the sort of a customer they were used to seeing there. One of the lookers-on whistled in a low tone, and winked to his companion.

"Is that coon gone adrift?" he whispered.

"Why he's rigged as nobby as a joke. I conjecture he might be with goin' through."

"Shet up!" was the short reply of his comrade; but it was accompanied by a meaning wink.

Bob walked up to the bar. The bartender, with the instinct of his profession, mechanically set out an empty glass, but he kept his eye fixed on his new customer with a doubtful and somewhat threatening glance.

"None of that," said Bob coolly. "I'm afraid my taste is spoiled for your brand of tipple. Not to say but it's good enough for them that likes it. But don't you know me, Phil Fooths?"

"No. I'll be shot if I do?"

"Maybe I've changed something since the day I warmed you up on the stone pile. Or the night that we tore out the variety shop."

The fellow cast a quick glance at Bob.

"Thunderation, if it ain't!" he ejaculated. "Blast me if it isn't Bob Rockett! How do you do, anyhow?" and he seized Bob's hand in a crushing grip. "Why blast it all, it's enough to cure sore eyes to look at you! You haven't dropped into a gold mine, have you? Or made a big stake on change?"

"Not much," replied Bob.

"Shoot me if you ain't got to imbibe then! I kin give you a pony of pure Custom House stuff as will make yer eyes water. Don't keep it fur everybody. But fur an old friend, like you—Taste that, Bob, and tell me if it's good."

"Prime," answered Bob, swallowing the strong liquor.

"It's first crop, Bob.—Blame me if I knowed what'd come of you. Ain't seen you fur years. Like thunderin' well to have a chat over old times."

The conversation continued between Bob and his old acquaintance. The group surrounding the domino-players regained their interest in the game, after the first novelty of this strange arrival had worn off.

Bob and Phil fell to conversing in a lower tone.

"A chap with a wen over his eye! Dresses like a sailor! Sings and sells ballads?"

"Just so," answered Bob.

"Do I know him? Well, I rather judge."

"Ah!" cried Bob, his eyes lighting up.

"Don't I know him though? Why that's Topheavy. A high old coon, too. He's one of old Smudge's angels. You recollect old Smudge?"

Bob's eyes flashed with sudden remembrance. The whole thing lit up before him at a glance. Old Smudge! Topheavy! How could he ever have forgotten them? A broad picture of his past life lay open before him.

"You're a coon, Phil," he cried, squeezing the rough fellow's hand. "I've got some business with Topheavy."

CHAPTER VIII.

BOB MAKES A PURCHASE.

The reader may have some recollection of old Smudge's den, as described in former story of the life of Bob Rockett. But for those who have failed to read that section of an authentic history, we may here repeat that it contained a collection of second-hand articles of every possible description, gathered within the one-time parlor of an old mansion, formerly known as the Rensselaer house, but now reduced to undreamed-of vileness.

The articles dealt in by old Smudge were gained in a variety of ways. He was now ready to loan, now to buy, now to act as a fence to any successful thief. And the rumor in the neighborhood was that he kept a number of private thieves of his own, who, under the guise of mendicants, paid well for their keep in the shape of pilfered articles.

The keeper of this delectable establishment was a spider-shaped old rogue, with small head, swollen body, falcon-like fingers, hooked nose, and eyes full of a foxy cunning. He was dressed in an old gray coat, that came nearly to his heels, while his head was covered by a greasy silk handkerchief, knotted at the corners.

Such as we have described him old Smudge sat in the midst of his miscellaneous collection, which overflowed shelves and tables, and found, here and there, lodging-room on the floor of his dusty apartment. A very small fire burned in a very small stove, in the center of the room, over which the old rogue crouched, absorbing as much coal gas as heat.

But he started from this position on hearing a sound at the door, and raised himself into an attitude of attention.

"Aha!" he cried, rubbing his hands. "Dat ish de cushtomer step. Somepody to pay dish mornin'. It ish very well. De old man ish always ready to pay or to sell."

It was, indeed, a heavy and confident tread, not the shuffling or the creeping step of the shiftless or the criminal classes.

The door flew open under a strong hand, and a well-dressed, stout-built man entered the room, no other than Bob Rockett, in fact.

He looked around him curiously at the miscellaneous collection, which comprised articles of every grade of value, anything from a pair

of second-hand shoes to a diamond bracelet being grist to old Smudge's mill.

Meanwhile the old fellow was regarding him with equal intentness. He had a retentive memory of faces, and felt sure that he had seen this important-looking personage before, but just where was not so easy to settle. He grew troubled in his mind. It was not often that he was thus baffled by a face, and he felt uneasy under this failure in his memory.

Bob helped himself to a creaking chair, and faced the proprietor of the den.

"How d'ye do, friend Smudge?" he asked. "Got a prime stock of goods in this evening, eh?"

"Not sho pad. Not sho pad," muttered the old fellow, as he placed the lamp so that it would shine on his visitor's face. "Dosh der gen'lman want to pay? Got some nice goots."

"Well, I don't know," drawled Bob. "Might be open to a bargain if it offered."

"What can I show Mishter—Mishter—Vat's der name, eh? It's sort o' shipped me." He looked at Bob with a foxy cunning.

"We will wait till it comes back again," Bob coolly replied. "I am not here to sell, even a name. Perhaps I might buy one, though. You keep some boarders; eh, Smudge?"

"What hash dat to do mit it?"

"That is no answer to my question."

"Sphose der ish some gen'lemen dat keep de old man company? What if der ish hey?"

"Nothing. Only I wanted to see a friend of yours that flourishes the sweet name of Topheavy. A little matter of business, you understand."

"Topheavy?" The old fellow looked at him cunningly. "Why dat one's gone. Dead, I sphose. Topheavy? Yes, I remembers him. What you want to pay, hey?"

"You infernal old her!" said Bob to himself. "Then I shall have to hunt him elsewhere," he said aloud. "You can't direct me where to find him?"

"He ish dead, I sphose. Dat's what dey all keeps doin'. Don't o'n come pack to worry folks. What you want to pay, hey?"

At this constant return to the charge Bob rose from his chair and began to make a critical survey of his surroundings. There was certainly an excellent opportunity to select.

"What do you call this?"

"Dat! Dat's a nutmeg grater."

"Don't want it. Have no nutmegs to grate. And this?"

"Dat's a pair of sphurs."

"And I haven't a horse. So I don't want your sphurs. And what is this?"

"Dat's a seven shooter. What you calls a revolver?"

"Bless us, you don't say that! As I'm going West next month something of this kind might be useful."

Bob examined the weapon with a critical eye.

"I never saw that style," he remarked. "How does the thundering affair load?"

"Give him here," answered the old man. "It ish ferrry easy. I keep some cartridge here, you shee."

He opened a drawer in his table and took from it some pistol cartridges.

"It ish vot you call a breech loader. Put de cartridge in dese holes. Den pull dish handle, and de thing's loaded."

"Why bless us, it's easy!" cried Bob, in seeming admiration. "In the part of the country I come from they don't have it down so fine. Have to ram powder and bullets in at the muzzle. Is there powder and ball both in those cartridges?"

The old fellow broke one open to show him how they were made. He looked up into Bob's face with a leer of seeming stupidity.

"And what's the plunder for this affair?"

"Ten tollars. And dog cheap."

"Ten! I'll give you five."

Old Smudge vigorously demurred. But Bob was an experienced buyer, and in ten minutes he owned the pistol, at an outlay of six dollars.

"Got any more of those cartridges?"

"Maybe one or two more," said the old fox, opening the drawer again and taking out a couple of cartridges.

Bob reached over for them. But suddenly his hand slipped past them and into the partly open drawer. When it came out again it held a revolver, enough like the one he had bought to be its mate.

"Excuse me, old Smudge, but I like this one better. I think I will exchange."

"No, no, no. I sell yon t'other. I sell you not dat. You gif me dat!"

He leaned over the table with hands cut-

stretched like eagle's claws. His face was suddenly baggard with anxiety.

"Don't get excited, old chap. I am a bit nervous, and this thing might go off. If you don't mind suppose you take me up-stairs for a call on your boarders."

As he spoke he presented the pistol at the old rogue in an apparently careless manner.

But old Smudge was not so easily frightened.

"If you's on de shoot, maybe you'd best took 't other," he ejaculated, seizing the pistol that lay upon the table. "Now s'pose you drop dat, 'cause my pistol's got a load in him, and you'n got nix nothing. Dat is what I t'inks."

"Let drive then, old chap. Here's a good target."

Bob dropped his pistol-hand and drew himself erect.

"Vot? You want me shoot you, hey?"

"Yes. If you can do it with a blank cartridge. Blaze away, old hoss."

Old Smudge looked troubled.

"Tain't nary blank cartridge," he cried. "Dare's de one I opened. Maybe dat ain't no bullet, den?"

"All correct, my old fox. And here's another opened. Let us see what's in this."

Bob tore open one of the cartridges which lay upon the table. There fell from the open paper a stream of powder grains. He dropped the empty paper. There was no sound of a bullet.

"So, who is right now, Smudgy?" he remarked, looking into the old fellow's pallid face. "And now, maybe you're as badly mistaken about this pistol. Maybe these ain't ball-cartridges in the chambers. Aha! you old coon, that was a smart trick of yours. Stand still there. I won't spoil any more of these cartridges by breaking them open; but I will try whether they are loaded with ball or not. Don't stir now. It won't hurt you if it is blank; and I only want to satisfy myself."

He raised the pistol and took point-blank aim at the old rascal, who crouched suddenly to the floor, holding up his hands in terror, while his face grew milky white.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he screamed. "I tells you mitout shootin'. It ish got a bullet."

"Oh! it has a bullet, then? Very well, that saves me from the expense of wasting one on your old carcass. For I'll swear that you're not worth the price of a pistol charge. Get up now, you thundering sly old hound. Don't keep jabbering there, hang you! I am not going through your silly old trash, so you needn't be scared. But I want to make a social call on your boarders, and if you don't get up and lead me to them very quick I am afraid this confounded affair will go off yet."

"Yes, yes," cried the old fellow, springing up with alacrity. "Why, shertainly. Degen-leman wants to shee my boarters. Why, juss you comes dis way. I takes you mit 'em right off."

He led the way through the door so quickly that Bob had to hurry to keep up with him. He probably had an idea of escaping. But, if so, his pursuer had no idea of letting him escape.

Old Smudge led the way up a flight of steps. As he neared their top he was taken with a sudden fit of coughing, which caused him to stop and almost strangle in the effort to clear his throat.

"Der dusht ish so pad," he stammered.

"The dust, eh? Well, I've got a sure cure for coughing. Turn this way and I will give it to you."

Old Smudge turned and started back in terror on finding that the muzzle of the pistol was almost touching his temple.

"It's good now, I tell you. You see, the very sight of the bottle has cured you. Lead on now."

The old rogue, quite cured of his cough, led on, his face growing more pallid. At the top of the stairs a door led to a large room on the third floor of the house. This he entered. It had at one time been a richly wainscotted and frescoed apartment, some slight trace of its former magnificence showing through the dilapidation. In the center of the room was a long, rough table. Near it was a stove, around which sat three men, busily engaged in smoking.

"Are these some of them?" asked Bob, hiding his weapon.

"Yes. Dose are some of my poys."

Bob looked at them critically.

Two of them were not at all like the man he was seeking; one being too tall and thin, the other short and with a humped back. The third was about the proper size. But his dress had not the most remote resemblance to that of a sailor; while his face was free from the disfigur-

ing wen which had so strongly marked Topheavy's countenance. And the heavy beard of the assumed sailor was replaced here by a short unshaved bristle of hair.

Bob took a quick survey of these men.

"My man is not here," he said. "Where are the others?"

"Didn't the old man tell ye dat Topheavy wash'n here no more? Topheavy ish gone away, I tells you. I s'pose he ish dead. But no matters, you can shee de oders. Come dis way."

There is such a thing as overplaying a game. And overplay is often more dangerous than underplay. Old Smudge fancied that he was acting with particular shrewdness at the very moment that he was defeating himself by his smartness.

Bob had made a discovery. But he only looked from the old fellow to the men, and then carelessly said:

"Very well. Lead on."

Smudge walked toward a door at the lower end of the room, Bob following him. But the ears of the latter were alert for the least sound. In fact, just as the conductor had reached the door in question, Bob quickly turned, pistol in hand, and the muzzle directed toward the other door.

"Stand there!" he commanded. "Or I'll bore a hole through you, as sure as your name is Topheavy!"

The fellow with the bristly beard had his hand on the door, and was on the point of leaving the room. He dropped the door handle as if it had been made of red-hot iron, and stood in a stupefied attitude.

"But you ish mistaken," and the old man gave a discordant laugh. "Dat ish not Topheavy. Dat ish mine cousin from Germany, Hans Junkmann. Ha! ha! Vat a mistake dat wash!"

"Dry up, old Smudge. The trick's played, and I have won the game. Come, Topheavy, don't try to play possum on me, for I know you like a breeze."

"What do you want?" asked the man, hoarsely.

"Your pals have split on you, and sold out the whole game. I want that bank-book, with all its contents, or devil take me, if I won't bore you with a bullet first, and jug you afterward!"

CHAPTER IX.

AN INTERVIEW IN THE TOMBS.

THE two prisoners were in the same cell in the Tombs, which delectable establishment was much too well patronized to give each of its guests a separate apartment.

Rusty Mike sat on the side of the bed, his elbows on his knees, and his chin resting on his hands.

"May the devil fly away with me for an infernal donkey!" he angrily growled. "Not two months out of quod, and to get myself jugged ag'in! And it's all your devilish fault, Beau Bink."

"I'd like to know how?" asked Beau, looking up with an injured air. "Why, you dragged me into it, neck and heels."

"You were too rascally ready to go. If you'd kicked, I'd 'a' backed down."

"That's mighty comfortin'," answered Beau, with a grimace. "Here I've been in business for twenty years, and never had to grin on the wrong side of iron bars before. You jerk me into this hole, and then give me rats for gettin' in. That's most decidedly rich."

"Dry up!" roared Mike. "Yer enough to make a hoss sick when you git started. Yer allers moralizin', blast you! I hate moralizin', and all that sort of truck. Are ye goin' to dry up now 'fore I bu'st yer head, you thunderin' old skin and bones?"

One would have thought, from Mike's fury, that Beau was trying hard to force some unpalatable doctrine on him, instead of sitting mute, and a little frightened. "It's just like yer blatherin': ther's no bridlein' that trotting tongue of yours."

He relapsed into silence for a moment.

"Maybe ther's a pair of us, though," he resumed. "Bob Rockett told me plain enough that if I kicked ag'in' him he'd make me sweat. I might 'a' known that he was just the chap to do it. But blast him, it's queer if we don't put a feather in his cap!"

At this moment some one stopped opposite the cell. The prisoners became quiet and attentive, as they heard the unlocking of the door. The next instant it was opened.

"This is the cell," remarked the keeper. "Do not be long. I will be close at hand."

A tall, well-built, and handsomely-dressed gentleman, strange to both the prisoners, entered, and the door was closed and fastened behind him.

He stood looking at them, with a peculiarly impassive expression of countenance, until they grew restless under his gaze.

"Which of you is Rusty Mike?"

"Not that half-and-half dandy you bet," growled Mike. "I calculate that name fits me best."

"And you are Beau Bink?"

"That's what my friends call me. Not as I was christened Beau. But—"

"That will answer," replied the visitor, shortly. "And you are in for robbing Bob Rockett, runner for the Provident Bank, during his business rounds."

"And what's the odds, if we is?" asked Mike, with a savage look.

The visitor stood in an easy attitude, one foot resting on the rail of the bed, his left hand in his pocket.

"And you accuse Bob Rockett of laying this game himself, and of sharing the spoils with you?"

"That's about the looks of it," replied Beau. "It was a set thing, right out."

"Excuse me," said the visitor, in his cool way, "but you are slightly mistaken."

"The hell we are!" roared Mike, in a tone divided between anger and surprise.

"Yes," and the speaker folded his arms, and looked steadily down upon them. "It was a set thing, no doubt. But Bob Rockett was not in the game."

"Who was, then?" asked Beau. "Being's you know so much, maybe you'll tell us that."

"Precisely. That is what I am here for."

"Well, you're a cool coon," growled Mike, looking up with astonishment. "I've seen smart ducks afore, but you take the rag off the bush. Maybe you'll let us know what you're arter, if we wait a year or two more."

"There is no doubt that it was a set-up job," repeated the visitor, in an unchanged tone.

"Paul Essex, one of the book-keepers of the bank, who has a desperate spite against Bob Rockett, laid this plan to ruin him. He engaged you to rob him, and to accuse him as an accomplice, if you should be taken. For this service he was to divide the spoils with you, and to get you out of the clutches of the law."

"Well, may I be eternally rumbodled if this ain't fun!" cried Mike. "Why, blast my eyes, if I ever heard the chap's name afore!"

"Drop that, now, Mike," rejoined Beau, with a meaning look. "Let the gentleman get through. Maybe he can prove—"

"I can only try to convince you," interrupted the visitor. "By arguing the point, you know. Suppose you let me hear your reasons why it is not so. Then I will give you mine why it is."

Mike looked up into the imperturbable face that surveyed him with such easy coolness. Shrewd as he was he could not guess what was in the wind.

"Why, the thing don't stand to no reason," he broke out. "I never twigged such a chap in my life."

"I disremember, just at present, anything of the sort," answered Beau, with a meaning wink to Mike. "But, of course, I can't be sure till I hear the gentleman's reasons."

"I have them here," replied the visitor, as he pulled out a well-filled pocket-book and deliberately selected from it two bank bills of large denomination. "Actions speak louder than words, you know. Just try, now, if you can't recollect something about what I have said."

"Why, now I think," began Beau. But Mike stopped him by a sharp pinch.

"What's about the size of that argument of yours?" he asked.

"This, for a beginning." He held under their eyes a pair of hundred-dollar bills.

"Paul Essex! Paul Essex!" cogitated Mike. "Why, blame it, I do begin to get hold of the chap now. Can't fetch back the set thing, though. It'll take another argument for that."

"This is only a first dose for your sick memory," replied the visitor. "When you remember the whole story, and inform the authorities that you made a mistake, and that it was Paul Essex, not Bob Rockett, who hired you to the plot, I fancy I can find an argument just twice as strong as this. And if the affair works well enough to lay this ex-confederate of yours by the heels, I promise to get you out of this scrape."

"Kin you do it?" cried Mike, excitedly.

"I have done harder things."

"Then I'm yer man. What d'ye say, Beau?"

Ain't you 'sperienced a change of memory, as the Methoders say?"

"It's just surprisin' how things does come back to one," replied Beau, his habitual smile expanding into a broad grin of satisfaction.

"Very well, then. Just tell me how the whole affair happened," continued the visitor. "I don't know the whole game, and would like to hear how it all occurred. And then, there may be some points on which I can refresh your memory."

He waited patiently for the requested story, Mike looking at him in a puzzled fashion. The stranger had certainly not made any assertions. He had only "refreshed their memories." Did he really think that this Paul Essex was connected with the robbery? Mike could not quite satisfy himself on that point.

A half hour more passed before the interview ended. There was a peculiar smile on the visitor's face as he left the prison. The plan had fully succeeded.

"If Bob does his share of the game properly we will have our friend Paul in serious trouble," he muttered. "And then to see how Grace Delorme will feel toward her unfortunate young lover. By the Lord, he shall not have her, if I have to spring the other trap on him!"

A few hours afterwards the speaker, Roger Glindon, met Bob Rockett at a previously-arranged rendezvous. This was at Joe Cracker's establishment, a place to which the reader was introduced in the first chapter.

They had obtained a table in a private room, back of the main eating saloon. Here, over a chop and a glass of ale, they prepared to discuss matters more important than the food before them.

"My fishing went just as I expected," remarked Roger. "Of course you only need to bait your hook well to catch that sort of trout. But what have you done?"

Bob proceeded to relate his adventure at old Smudge's den. After telling what the reader already knows, he continued:

"I knew my man was there. The old coon's coughing spell on the stairs was only a signal. And when we were in the room he kept mouthing over Topheavy's name, till I saw there was an egg somewhere in the wool. One of the chaps had turned a trifle pale on seeing me. But, then, he hadn't my man's whiskers nor his wen. However, as we were going out of the door I caught him sneaking out at the other. It was his side face I glimpsed then, and I knew my man on the spot."

"And what afterward?"

"I drew a bee-line on him with the old hound's seven-shooter, and Topheavy came to time in the neatest fashion you ever saw. The rest of them I ordered out of the room, with a very persuasive argument. They went. Then I had a private interview with my friend Topheavy. I don't want to brag of my reasoning powers, but I did convince that man, first that he had a hand in the robbery, second that he had the spoils, and third that it would be a noble act in him to hand them over. Of course the seven-shooter helped amazingly in the business. The very sight of it cleared up his memory on the first two points. But I had to send a bullet through his hair, within half an inch of his ear, before I could make him see the force of my last point. However, he came up nobly. And—don't tell me I was weak-minded, Roger—but I did make him a present of a ten-dollar bill for his honesty. Virtue always deserves to be rewarded."

Roger laughed at Bob's idea of honesty. He took a cut of the chop before again speaking.

"And you have the spoils?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Bob, rising, and walking to the door, in order to see that there were no ears nor eyes inconveniently near.

He then returned to the table, and took from his inner pocket a long and wide leather book, apparently well filled. This he laid on the table before Roger.

The latter took it up and opened it, making a rapid examination of its contents.

"Plenty of drafts, checks, and the like; but no money. Where is the cash?"

"Confiscated," replied Bob, slapping his pocket. "I fancy I had as much right as Topheavy to be rewarded for my virtue."

Roger laughed, while he continued his investigation of the book.

"The old story was 'to the victor belong the spoils,'" he remarked. "You have changed that. 'To the victim belong the spoils,' is your version. Your friends did not make much by their enterprise. Two of them locked up, and the third with a ten-dollar bill for his trouble. However, as I am to give them the reward of a

good memory they may come out all right in the end. I wish the loan of this book, Bob."

"It's yours, my boy. And now let's finish our chop and get out of here. It might not be safe for us to be seen too much together, just at present."

Two days more passed away. On the succeeding day Mr. Darling came late into the bank, it being after one o'clock before he made his appearance. An expression of strange preoccupation and trouble was upon his face. He glanced with a look of disquiet at the busy clerks, and passed on somewhat hastily to his private room. Here he found one of the principal directors of the bank awaiting him.

The latter was a stout, florid man, with a remarkable expanse of waistcoat. He looked up inquiringly on the president's entrance.

"Well?" he asked. "It is really so?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Darling, sinking somewhat wearily into his chair.

"But that is only a charge. There was as much made against young Rockett. These fellows are not to be believed without proof. Have you seen the wife of this Mike Crapper?"

"She is in the same story," replied Mr. Darling, "and gives so many details, that if it is all false, she must have a powerful imagination."

"What further?" asked the director, looking at the troubled face of the president.

"A search warrant has been obtained. Paul's room is being examined. As yet all is in doubt. If nothing is found there, these fellows' words are no evidence. If, on the contrary, it be as they say—"

He paused, as a hand was heard on the door of the room. It opened, and a sharp-looking person entered, and closed the door carefully behind him. He walked up to the table, with his eyes fixed in a peculiar lock on the two bank magnates.

"Well?" asked the director.

Mr. Darling remained silent, though his face was full of questioning anxiety.

The new-comer said nothing. He simply inserted his hand in the inside pocket of his coat, drew something thence, and laid it before their eyes on the table.

It was Bob Rockett's runner's book!

"Paul Essex is the man," he said.

CHAPTER X. THE PERILS OF RACING.

THE snow was falling heavily in the streets of New York. It had been snowing since midnight and the pavements were now covered to the depth of several inches with their chill white carpet.

Sleighs were already out, taking advantage of this fortunate snowfall, the first of the winter which had made any tolerable sleighing in the New York avenues.

On Fifth avenue the cheerful rattle of bells was incessant, as sleigh after sleigh dashed onward, laden with merrymakers, in whom happy hearts beat warmly under furred robes and beaver coats.

One of these handsome vehicles, drawn by a pair of light-stepping grays, dashed onward with startling rapidity, their driver being either unable or unwilling to check his mettlesome steeds, which dragged the light vehicle as if it was but a feather.

Yet a firm hand was on their reins, and a cool, impassive eye watched every movement of the swift horses, for it was Roger Glindon who occupied the sleigh, and controlled the animals with the skill of a practiced horseman. He was alone. The vehicle, indeed, was only intended for two, being a light, shell-like toy of a sleigh, yet in reality as stanch as though made in every part of tempered steel.

More than one of the other drivers on the street sought to keep pace with the swift grays, but they were all distanced, the loud jingle of the bells seeming to send back a laughing defiance to all competitors. On and on they went, with laugh and merry glee, new sleighs wheeling into the avenue, until it was crowded with the swift-gliding teams, while the air seemed vocal with the ringing music of a thousand tinkling bells.

As the suburban portions of the city were reached the number of vehicles somewhat thinned out, while the speed of those remaining increased, and merry defiance passed from one to another as a racing trot succeeds the slower pace further down the snow-clad avenue.

And now the snow ceased, it being quickly followed by a break in the clouds, through

which the sun poured his bright beams, causing the snow-crystals to sparkle as if the streets were strewn with diamonds.

The air was chilly yet, but, nestled under robes and furs, the pleasure-seekers defied the winter's frosty breath, and laughed in the teeth of the north-west wind as they flew lightly onward.

"Come on!" cried Roger, to a brace of gentlemen drivers, who were trying to keep pace with him. "Here is a clear field and no favors. If you have a fancy to try what is in your horses, now is your chance."

He was holding in his animals as he spoke. Accepting the defiance the two gentlemen touched their horses with the whip, and drove on at a rattling speed. Roger fell somewhat in the rear, they turning to him with mocking laughter as they found that they were drawing ahead of him.

"Push on!" he cried, smiling. "I only want to give you a fair start."

"Pass us, if you dare!" came the defiant response. "You will need to give some more leg-music to your grays."

"We shall see," replied Roger.

He loosened the firm grip which he had kept upon his reins, shook them over the backs of his mettlesome steeds, and sat back with a slight smile showing his white teeth.

With a quick leap the horses darted onward. Swiftly as the two racing sleighs in advance were going, in a minute they were overtaken. For an instant the three light vehicles ran side by side. Then that of Roger drew ahead, he looking back on his excited competitors with that mocking smile which he had worn since the first challenge.

"You will need another touch of the whip, gentlemen," he called back. "Have you any advices for Harlem? If you have, you had better send them by my two-horse express."

"That is only a spurt," replied one of the others, a little angrily. "We will soon lap that up again."

Roger laughed incredulously. In advance were several other sleighs, moving more slowly. One by one these were reached and passed by the racing trio.

They were now approaching one, a pretty little basket-work affair, which did not seem inclined to draw out to make way for the racers, as the others had done. As they neared it, Roger, now a full length in advance of his competitors, shot so closely by it that the driver, in some alarm, drew his horses suddenly to the left.

This was an unfortunate movement. The racing sleigh upon that side of the street came upon this awkward obstruction so quickly that it was impossible to avoid it. The horses dashed past without touching, but the sleigh struck it heavily. There was a sound of crashing timbers, followed by the gasping cry of a woman, and a heavy fall.

The sleigh had been overturned, and thrown out one of its occupants. The other was still clinging to the reins, his feet on a portion of the broken vehicle attached to the frightened horses.

At the cry Roger Glindon reined in his grays, looking around to see what had happened. The other racers did the same. Roger, in fact, drew his animals around in such a way as to crowd the excited horses, with their imperiled driver, to the side of the road. He jammed them in here so closely that they soon came to a halt.

The young man who had been bearing with all his weight upon the reins now ran to their heads, and in a minute had them under control.

"Can you manage them?" asked Roger.

"Yes. They are gentler. They will be over their fright in a minute. Will you please look after the lady?"

When Roger reached the broken sleigh he found that his two rivals in the race had just picked up the lady from her unpleasant position in the snow.

She seemed dazed, but not insensible, and stood resting on the proffered arm of one of the gentlemen in a weak but graceful manner.

"Is she hurt?" asked Roger, anxiously.

"No, sir. I thank you for your interest," replied the lady herself, turning toward the speaker.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "Grace—Mrs. Delorme! Is it you who have been put in such imminent peril?"

"Mr. Glindon!" she replied, in a tone of equal surprise. "It is fortunate to have met you. But my poor cousin, is he injured?"

"Oh, no! he and the horses are all right.

But he will need to look after them. My sleigh is at your service to return home."

The young man came up at this instant, having fastened the horses.

"I hardly know what to do," he remarked. "If one of these gentlemen could send me a person to look after the horses. But how are you to return?" He wore a somewhat helpless look upon his young face.

"How are you, Louis?" asked Roger, holding out his hand to the youth, over whose face flashed a look of pleased recognition. "I will take Mrs. Delorme home. I presume you can manage with the horses then."

"Oh, yes! Thank you. And the sleigh is past management. I shall be much obliged to you, Mr. Glindon."

Grace turned to the other gentlemen, and thanked them in her sweet voice for the service they had rendered her.

"Not me, I beg you," said one of them. "My awkwardness caused all this trouble."

"The awkwardness was on our side," she replied. "And yet, you will excuse me, gentlemen, for saying that this street is too much frequented for racing."

She stepped into Roger's sleigh, into which he crowded the blankets and furs which had fallen from hers, wrapping her up in the warmest manner.

"But are you quite sure you can manage, Louis?" she anxiously asked. "And how will you get home yourself?"

"I shall have no difficulty," he replied, with a look of relief. "I am only too glad that you are so well cared for. I can ride the horses home, if nothing better offers."

The other two gentlemen were by this time in their sleighs, and driving onward, one of them rather glad to get away from the damage he had done.

"That's all right, Louis," remarked Roger, as he gathered up the reins. "There is no doubt but that you can manage horses. Good-day."

The next moment the swiftsteeds were traveling homeward at a rapid pace, the occupants of the sleigh so buried in robes that they scarcely felt the cutting wind.

There was silence between these two, so unexpectedly thrown together, for several minutes. Roger appeared too much occupied with his horses for conversation, while the lady leaned back in her seat with an air of relief, as if she felt that silence secured her from an embarrassing situation.

But as they neared the vicinity of the park he drew the horses to a slower pace, and let the reins rest easily in his hand as he turned to his companion.

"You are silent," he remarked, in an inquiring tone. "I hope you were not really hurt."

"Not at all, Mr. Glindon. A little nervously shaken, it is true; but not injured in any degree."

"Then why so silent?"

"But we were both silent," she answered; a little confusedly. "Probably because you were occupied and I was resting."

"That was not my reason," he replied. "It was, rather, because I could hardly bring myself to speak, after your letter; that cruel letter that cut off from me all hope."

"I beg you will not refer to it," she replied.

"But why should I not? No decision is utterly final. You may have written hastily. Your sentiment may have changed since then."

"It has not changed," she coldly responded.

"Yet it is hard to be dismissed without a reason; banished without a crime," he persisted.

"Forgive me for insisting, Grace, but why have you rejected my love?"

She started at this direct question. Her eyes flashed with a sense of anger. A moment's hesitation, and then she answered:

"Because I do not love you in return."

"No, no!" he quickly exclaimed; "it is because—"

"Because what, sir?"

"Excuse me for saying that I am well aware of the attentions paid you by Paul Essex; and of the cause of my suit being so unsuccessful."

"Sir!" Her cheek was red with anger. "Will you be kind enough to stop the sleigh. I did not accept your escort for the purpose of being insulted."

"Nor do I dream of any intention of insult," he replied, his eye keeping its cold fixed glare. "I speak of Paul Essex's attentions for another reason. You are surely aware of the change in his position?"

"I do not know what you mean, sir."

"But I as your father not informed you?"

"He has told me nothing." She looked at the speaker with growing inquietude.

"And have you observed nothing? In his manner, I mean."

"Yes. He has seemed troubled and self-distracted." She was growing pale, and her eyes were full of pleading inquiry. "Oh, sir! do not keep me in suspense! If anything serious has happened to Paul—to Mr. Essex, tell me at once. Has any accident—"

"Hardly an accident," he interrupted.

"Then what can it be?" She clasped his arm, and looked up pleadingly in his face.

"It is difficult to tell you, Mrs. Delorme. That is, considering your intimate acquaintance with this—this young man."

"Oh, do not keep me in this cruel suspense! You are sporting with my anxiety."

"I would hardly do that," he replied, with much display of feeling. "I do not speak because it is too painful to have to destroy your illusions. It is not an accident which has happened to Paul Essex."

"What then?"

"A disgrace. A crime, if I must call it so."

"A crime!" There was an agony of dread and painful suspense in the clasp of her hands.

"Paul Essex has been detected in a plot to rob the bank. The evidence against him was so direct and positive that he is now in prison, committed for trial."

"Oh!"

This exclamation seemed to tear her heart up with it. She fell back in the sleigh, while the paleness of death overspread her features.

Roger drove steadily onward, his eyes fixed upon his horses.

"But there must be some dreadful, some hideous mistake!" she excitedly cried, throwing herself forward until her startled eyes looked into the depths of his. "This is some false accusation—some enemy of his—"

She stopped suddenly, a quick suspicion leaping into her face, as she observed his impulsive countenance.

"It may be possible," he quietly replied. "You will have to question your father. All I know of the matter is this: The two men who are in prison on the charge of robbery of the runner of the Provident Bank have declared that Paul Essex engaged them to perform this robbery. The wife of one of these men also testifies to the same effect. It is said that he has been for some time seeking to ruin Mr. Rockett. A month or two ago he claimed to have discovered something wrong in the runner's accounts, but on investigation they were found correct. Mr. Rockett now claims that his book has been tampered with, and false entries introduced. But that is not all. A search was made in Mr. Essex's room, and there was found the most overwhelming evidence; no less than the stolen bank-book, empty of its cash, yet still containing its checks and other papers."

Grace Delorme's cheek was the color of death. A strange wildness filled her eyes. She said not a word, but her fingers were convulsively clasped.

He remained silent for several minutes, closely observing her. He then spoke, in a quiet and persuasive tone.

"An accident, of course, would not have changed Mr. Essex's relations toward you. A crime necessarily does. You can have no further acquaintance with a man who could commit such an act. Am I presumptuous, then, to reopen—"

"It is not true!" she broke out suddenly.

"There is some vile plot to ruin him! He is incapable of crime, and I shall not rest until I have proved it."

She fell back again, exhausted by her intense excitement.

CHAPTER XI. BETTING ON BILLIARDS.

THE click of ivory balls announced that a game of billiards was in full operation. There had, in fact, been a number of games, for there were many tables in the greatly frequented Occidental Billiard Hall. But game after game had been given up, as the interest concentrated around one table near the center of the room, where some very brilliant play was being performed.

One of the players in this attractive game was Roger Glindon, the other was a player of some repute, named George Farley.

Roger's cool, keen eye and steady hand made him very expert at any game requiring muscular skill, and the interest of the observers was enlisted by the fact that he had just made a brilliant run of fifty points. The game was close, however. Farley had already scored fifty-seven points, and he took the cue again with the balls in a good position for a run. The growing crowd looked on with interest as he began to nurse his balls, and add point after point to his score.

Bob Rockett was among the spectators, and it would not have needed a skillful eye to see that he

had been drinking, for his face was flushed, and his voice was loud and blustering as he praised the triumph of his friend. He remained in glum silence during Farley's play. But when the latter missed a fair shot, after scoring twenty-three points, Bob burst into a mocking laugh.

"Why, an old cow ought to have got that point," he insultingly remarked.

"Do you think you could have done it?" asked one of Farley's supporters.

"Me? I ain't no billiardist. Glindon there would have done it, and worse."

"Yes, if he didn't miss."

"He ain't one of the missing kind. He is going to carry off this game. You can bet on that."

"No, thank you," replied the other, laughing. "If I do any betting, I should prefer to do it on the other side."

"Don't you try it, my friend. There, do you see that now? There was never a neater carom made. Why, he's scored fifteen or twenty fresh points already."

"Suppose he has? I didn't say he was not a good player."

"Look at that! Look at that! Why, it's a miracle! Your chap's nowhere alongside of him. If you're so anxious to lay a bet, I'm your man."

"I have not said a word about betting."

"Oh, blast it, if you want to back out, I ain't particular. I thought you had some nerve."

"I have nerve enough for you," replied the man, angrily.

Roger had continued his play during this loud colloquy, which was attracting as much attention as the game. He had already made twenty points, and was still rolling up his score. He paused an instant and looked around, as if to say something to the disputing pair. In this glance his eyes caught sight of a small, plainly-dressed man, with sharp-featured face, who was regarding, in an unconcerned manner, the loud-talking partisans.

Roger turned again to the table, a peculiar expression passing over his face.

"Name your bet," exclaimed Bob, with a somewhat thickened utterance.

"I'll go you five dollars on Farley."

"Five devils! Do you calculate that I rake in such picayune bets as that? That isn't my sort. Five dollars? Say five hundred, and I'm your man."

Everybody looked around with interest at this loud offer.

"Suppose I should say that I am not a betting man?" remarked Bob's antagonist.

"Then you would prove yourself a man of good sense and hinder my friend there from making a fool of himself," said Roger, as, with a seemingly careless motion of the cue, he made a difficult shot.

"You would prove yourself a coward," persisted Bob, who was too headstrong with liquor to be easily checked.

"Why, hang it, my friend, if you are so anxious to risk your cash I will take that bet," said another man, stepping forward.

"You're a gentleman," cried Bob, with an oath of satisfaction. "No odds. Five hundred, even up. Give me your hand on it."

The betters shook hands.

"And here is my stake," said the second speaker.

"There ain't no use in putting up the cash," replied Bob, with a thickened utterance. "We are both gentlemen, I fancy, and we understand one another, don't we?"

"We don't know each other, at any rate," rejoined the other. "You came here, my friend, blustering and offering your big bets. Now I'm your man, square out. But you've got to post up. Here's my cash. Cover it, or back down. That's my style."

"Why, do you suppose I can't?" queried Bob, running his hand into his pocket. "I could smother you with five-hundred-dollar bills if it came to that. Here's your gold-dust."

The eyes of the small man in the rear flashed with intelligence, as he watched Bob's strenuous efforts to get at his pocket-book.

"There's thirty points and a tie, friend Farley," remarked Roger, laying down his cue.

"Yes. But the cue's yours yet."

"No. We will stop the game, if you please. I am not a gambler myself, and want nobody to gamble on my play. So I intend to stop this betting by stopping the game."

There was a quick movement, and a murmur of surprise and dissatisfaction at this announcement.

"You ain't no gambler, with a hook!" roared Bob, angrily. "And suppose two gentlemen do want to risk their money, what is it anybody's business but their own?"

"It is only that you can't bet on my playing."

"All right then, if you're so thin-skinned," retorted the second better, replacing his money in his pocket. "I don't want to hurt any gentleman's feelings."

"Nor I don't neither," growled Bob. "Only it's mighty queer where them fine feelings came from so sudden."

"Go on, Mr. Glindon," said Farley. "The gentlemen will not bet, since you object to it."

"Let us make the game one hundred points then, and make an end of it."

"And the cue yours!" replied Farley. "I would not have a ghost of a show."

"Yes, you will," rejoined Roger, striking his ball so carelessly as to make a misshot.

The remainder of the game was played with less good fortune than the previous portion. Roger seemed to have lost his skill, for he missed several fair shots. And fortune seemed to turn against Farley, for the balls rolled into the most difficult positions.

They were longer on the last twenty than they had been on the first eighty of the game.

"By Jove, that shot gives you the game!" cried Farley. "Only two points to make, and see what a chance I have left you."

Roger took the cue in silence, and sent his ball with a quick strong shot. He made his point easily, but, instead of nursing the combination, he drove the balls in a flying march over the table. They settled into an unpromising combination.

"Too strong in the wrist," remarked Farley, as he took the cue.

Three easy shots, and the game was scored in his favor. Roger laid down his cue, and went to wash his hands.

Farley followed him.

"What ailed you?" he asked in a low tone. "Were you anxious to lose that game?"

"Yes. I wanted to let that fool see that it is not safe to bet on me."

"Oh! Well, I'll swear that I didn't think you were so tender-hearted."

A few minutes afterward Roger walked, with his steady step, from the hall, and into the street. Bob Rockett, who had been fretting and cursing in a low tone to himself, hurried after him, and caught him, with no light clutch, by the arm.

"What in the blazes are you up to now?" he asked, with a hoarse utterance.

Roger turned and faced him angrily.

"I had better ask what ails you," he said, "only that it needs only half an eye to see that it is liquor."

"And suppose it is? I calculate that I've got my wits about me. Shoot me if you didn't throw that game away on purpose."

"I know it," replied Roger, coolly.

"And why?"

"To keep you from throwing away a bigger one."

"Me? Hang me if you ain't got me by the boots now."

"Come with me, Bob. This spot is too public to talk business in."

Roger led the way up the street, until they had reached a less frequented locality. Here he began the conversation again.

"Haven't you sense enough to know that it is not safe for you to have a pocketful of money just now?" he asked, in a severe tone. "What would our game against Paul Essex be worth if you were found making five hundred dollar bets?"

"But who is to find me?" queried Bob, a little abashed. "There was nobody in that billiard-room knew me."

"Oh, nobody! Of course, nobody—except one of the sharpest detectives on the force. But, of course, detectives don't count in your wise fancy."

"A detective?" cried Bob, in alarm.

"Just so," said Roger. "He hadn't his eye off you for a minute. He may be following us now, for all I know to the contrary. I have been on the look-out, to be sure. But these fellows are very shrewd."

"And who, in the fiend's name, has put a watch on me?" blustered the tipsy man.

"That's to find out," replied Roger, cautiously. "You are suspected. There is nothing surer than that. Some one has you under surveillance. You will need to be as cautious as a fox, or you will find yourself in trouble. It is some friend of Paul Essex, I judge, who is trying to work a counter-game."

"Let them pile in, then," blustered Bob. "I bet they don't sell us out."

"Sell you out, you mean. I am going to cut loose. If you are so anxious to get yourself into a scrape, you shall not drag me in with you, Bob Rockett?"

"You trust me," replied Bob, with a wink. "I am not so deuced green as you think."

"Trust you!" replied Roger, reflectively—"Give me that five hundred dollars," he continued, after a moment; "or more if you have it. It is not safe in your pocket. Let me take care of it."

"Five hundred!" Bob laughed, mockingly. "Why I haven't five dollars here," slapping his pockets. "I was only playing a game of brag on them coons. If you were to run me through a cedar mill, you couldn't squeeze fifty dollars out of me."

"Then you have more wit than I gave you credit for. But see here, my friend, I have one more bit of advice for you. You must give up drinking until this affair blows over. Your tongue is too loose when you have liquor on board."

"That's taken in. Anything more?"

"Yea. Keep a sharp eye open for a little, slender chap, dressed in plain gray, and with a wide mouth, a sharp-pointed nose, and little, ferret eyes. Whenever you see a chap like that, watch yourself, for there will be thunder in the air."

"The detective?" asked Bob.

"Exactly."

"That's all taken in, Roger. You can sleep sound, my boy. Forewarned is forearmed, you know."

"Then you move on. I will stop here and keep an eye open for the detective. I have a fancy that he is following you."

Roger drew into the shade of a doorway, and waited patiently, while Bob walked on. But nobody answering to his own description of the detective passed, although he continued on guard for ten minutes.

Bob was now several blocks distant. He clapped his pocket with an air of satisfaction.

"Maybe I'm able to take care of my own money, Roger Glindon," he muttered. "I had to lie to you, though, for you'd have made me fork over if I had told you that I had a pocketful. I suppose you're right though about the whisky. It does get the best of a fellow. I think I shall go straight home.—I feel thundering mean inside, though. I calculate one

drink won't hurt. 'This one won't count,' as old Rip says."

He turned into a drinking-saloon. Of course, he fully intended to take but the one dram, and then proceed homeward. But one dram opens the door very wide to another. He met some acquaintances, and before he left the saloon the one dram had swelled to a half dozen.

Bob and his friends left the saloon together. He was tipsy again, and had not the most remote intention of going straight home. The party instead made their way to a neighboring gambling hall, where high play was the rule.

And Bob was not long content to act the part of a spectator. The money burned in his pocket as hotly as the liquor in his brain. He was soon in high play at one of the tables.

It was only a half-hour since he had left Roger, and already all three of the latter's injunctions had been broken. Instead of concealing his money he was risking it freely on a gambling table. Instead of getting sober, he had got drunker than ever. And instead of being on the look-out for the detective he had forgotten all about him.

And yet just back of him stood the small man with sharp nose and ferret eyes against whom he had been warned. The only difference was in his coat, which had changed from gray to black, under cover of which change he had passed Roger Glindon without detection.

"Won again!" cried Bob. "Here's for you! Fifteen hundred on the ace!"

"Ace it is," said the croupier, in his metallic voice. "You win."

"And I win," said to himself the small man with the sharp nose. "You bet on the ace, but you will find that you've played the deuce, before I am done with you."

CHAPTER XII.

PAUL ESSEX HAS A VISITOR.

It was no bungling head which had worked up the charge against Paul Essex. The story told by the two prisoners was explicit, and full of details. The evidence given by Mike Crapper's wife agreed, point for point, with his own. The conspiracy had been made in her presence, and it was an easy matter to substitute the name of Paul Essex for that of Bob Rockett. And finally, the missing book, with all its contents except the cash, had been found in his room, not openly displayed, but concealed amid a mass of papers. To add to the strength of this evidence a considerable sum of money had been discovered in his desk, far more than any bank officer would be likely to keep in his room.

It is not surprising that the President and directors of the bank had become convinced of his guilt. Mr. Darling would willingly have avoided prosecution of the charge, but the remainder of the directors insisted upon it, and he was obliged to yield.

To Paul Essex himself this incarceration in a prison cell, under a charge of crime was an overwhelming blow. Day and night he sat brooding and despairing. The world was all dark to him. After all his efforts to make himself a record as an honorable and upright man, to be thus suddenly plunged into disgrace and dishonor, it was more than he could bear. And she whom he loved—what would she think of this charge of crime, sustained with such telling evidence?

He buried his face in his hands as this thought came upon him with crushing force. Even if he should be cleared, the imputation of crime would remain. She would never ally herself to a disgraced man.

In his preoccupation he failed to hear the opening and closing of his cell door, and lifted his eyes only at the sound of a voice that sent a wild thrill of joy through his veins. Before him stood a woman dressed in plain black, and with a thick veil over her face. But her hands were clasped, and her figure bent, as if under a sudden feeling of sorrow or mental agony.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, rising impulsively to his feet. "That voice! that form! Can it be that Grace Delorme, she whom I thought would forever despise me, has come to visit me even in this poor cell?"

"It is I," she replied, throwing back her veil with a quick movement. "Despise you, Paul? I should be base indeed to desert you in this extremity, when the world has turned against you, and your enemies have so basely hel'd you."

Her voice was full of feeling and indignation. Tears moistened her soft blue eyes.

"Oh, then you at least trust me! You do not believe me guilty of this base crime?"

"No, indeed!" she spoke with energy. "I know that you are incapable of it, and that a cruel conspiracy has been devised to ruin you."

"Now I care not what the world thinks!" he cried, joyfully. "Since she whom I—yes, whom I love, I must speak what has been so long buried in my thoughts. It has been so long, and in such silence, that I have looked up to her as my star. But now I may hope that I love not in vain, since she deigns to visit me in my prison cell."

He looked into her face with eyes that swam in love and hope.

What he saw there we cannot tell, but in a moment he had her hands in his, and was devouring her blushing face with ardor looks.

"Dear Paul!" she murmured.

His arm was around her slender waist; their lips met; for minutes they stood thus, lost in the intoxication of happy love.

"You do not believe me guilty, dear Grace?"

She was seated on the only chair which the cell possessed. He half-kneel'd beside her.

"Guilty!" Her soft tone was full of reproach.

"Your innocence shall be proved. I may do something, Paul. Tell me all that has occurred."

He did so, giving her in full detail the whole story. She listened quietly, but with a quick, intelligent face. Silence rested for several minutes after the completion of the narrative. She sat looking down upon him with pitying but alert eyes.

"There were three men who committed the robbery," she suddenly exclaimed. "Two only of these testify against you. Where is the third?"

"He escaped. We can scarcely find him."

"But they say that he was so well marked, with a huge wen over his eye. It cannot be easy for such a man to conceal himself. Have you never seen—"

He stopped her by a sudden exclamation.

"Can it be?" he cried. "I remember such a man, when I was a boy living down by the river. He was one of old Smudge's beggars."

"Old Smudge?"

Paul hereupon explained who and what old Smudge was, her eyes lighting up with animation as she listened to him.

"And one thing more. You have no conception how that book came into your room?"

"None whatever."

"And the money found there?"

"It was not mine."

"Your mother keeps a boarding-house Paul? Strangers occasionally apply for board?"

"Yes, certainly."

"We may fathom this dark plot yet. The third robber may be found. We may track the person who placed these evidences in your room. I shall do my best. I hope to succeed."

"You?"

"Yes, I. Who better than I?"

"Oh, my dear love!" He pressed her hands with fervent energy. "But I can never consent to that. No, no; you shall not expose yourself to possible insults, to—"

"What would the love be worth that would stop at such light obstacles?" Her fair, sweet face bent over him, her eyes warm with love and hope.

With a quick impulse he caught her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers.

"My love! my own dear love!" he murmured in tender accents.

That prison cell was lit up by the warm glow of affection to those two young souls, until no palace hall could have seemed more rich and glorious.

If we follow the movements of Grace Delorme during the few succeeding days we shall find that her offer of aid was no empty promise. Her first movement was to engage the police in her service. A long conference with a shrewd detective officer resulted in a watch being put on Bob Rockett, with the object of ascertaining if he was spending any undue amounts of money.

The efforts to discover the third robber were less successful. A close guard was kept on the old Rensselaer house, in which it was well known that such a person had long resided. Yet he seemed to have vanished. No trace of such a man was to be discovered. Some half-dozen persons, variously crippled, were seen to enter and leave the house, but no sign of the man with the wen.

Several days passed without any discovery being made.

As for the third object to be ascertained, Grace undertook the task as her own.

In a modest house on East Twentieth street Mrs. Essex had for several years kept boarders, eking out the slender salary which Paul had at first received in the bank by this means of gaining a livelihood.

And even now, although her son was doing so much better, the active little woman was not content to settle down to idleness and dependence. She liked the bustle and business of her well-filled house, and continued to cram it to repletion with the gentlemen and ladies whom the fame of her well-spread table drew to her house.

She was as active, as good-natured and as devoted to her friends as when we saw her, several years before, in her single room in the poorest quarter of the city.

But Paul's imprisonment had been a dreadful blow to the good woman, and when Grace called upon her, she found her seated gloomily in her neat little parlor, having apparently abandoned the affairs of her household to the hands of chance.

"It is so kind in you, Miss Grace, to believe in him," said the poor woman, sorrowfully. "But I shall never get over it. I know I never shall."

"But you certainly believe in him?"

"Why, of course I do. My Paul never took a penny that he had not earned."

"In that case, then, he did not put that book and money in his room?"

The poor woman looked the picture of uncertainty. This was the mystery which had so troubled her that she was unable to think reasonably about it.

"How did it ever get there?" she murmured.

"You have many boarders, Mrs. Essex."

"It was none of them," she energetically answered. "I know them all well. They are responsible people."

"The book was found four days ago?"

"Yes. Just after dinner. Two men came here with search-warrants, and examined poor Paul's room."

"Could they have put the book there themselves?"

"Why, they were regular officers, Miss Grace. And besides, I went with them myself to the room, and watched them. I don't think they could have done it."

"Were there any other strangers in your house that morning?"

"No. That is, except a gentleman looking for

board. But he didn't like the room I showed him, and so he left. He was the only one."

Grace's eyes lighted up. She looked with an amused glance into the innocent face of Mrs. Essex. The poor body seemed so utterly unsuspecting.

"Where was this room you showed the stranger?" asked Grace.

"It was a back room on the third floor."

"Near Paul's room?"

"Yes. He has the front room just before it."

"And I presume that there is a door between the two rooms?"

"Oh yes. But it is kept locked. And the key is on Paul's side."

Grace's face was growing brighter. The scent was getting warm.

"Did you show this stranger the room?"

"Why, no. I was too busy. I sent Mary, my waiter girl, to show him."

"I wish you would call Mary."

Mrs. Essex, somewhat surprised at this question, called the girl.

She was a rather pretty Irish girl, with an intelligent face, and an expression much less confiding than that of her mistress.

Grace fixed her eyes upon the face of the girl, while Mrs. Essex questioned her. These questions, however, brought out the same fact, that she had shown the room to the stranger, who had closely examined it, and then declined to take it.

"Did he ask you any questions about the other occupants of the house?" asked Grace.

"No. He was not a bit talkative. He was a very quiet sort of person."

"But perhaps you volunteered some information."

"No, indeed, miss. I always take care not to say much to strangers. I only told him that he would find the room a very nice one, and would only have pleasant people near him, for Mr. Paul had the room in front of him. I didn't mention the name of another soul, and he didn't ask me one question."

A smile passed over Grace's countenance. Evidently the stranger had had no need to ask questions.

"And you were in the room all the time he was there?"

"Oh yes. He only stayed a few minutes."

She spoke with a hasty accent. Grace looked at her closely. A faint tinge of red came into the girl's cheek.

"You are sure you did not leave him alone in the room? Not for a minute?"

"Why no, miss. Why, of course I wouldn't do that. We never do with strangers."

Grace's close look seemed to disconcert her. Her eyes shifted uneasily under it.

"That will do," said the questioner.

The girl turned, and hastily left the room.

"What other girls do you keep, Mrs. Essex?"

"A cook, and a chambermaid."

"Are either of them intimate with Mary?"

"Yes. She and the chambermaid are very thick."

"Then call this girl, immediately. They must not have a chance to see each other."

Mrs. Essex, more surprised than ever, went in search of the girl in question. Grace remained, with a faint smile upon her lips.

The girl who now entered was very young, and had an innocent, confiding expression. Grace asked her a number of indifferent questions in regard to her age, her situation, etc. She finally began to question about her relations with the other servants.

"What kind of a girl is Mary?"

"Oh, a very nice girl, miss. I like her ever so much."

"She is not mean, I hope. Still she ought not to waste her money."

"She don't. She is very careful. Only once in a while she spends money."

"The last few days, for instance?"

"Why yes," with a look of surprise.

"Then she has spent money freely these few days?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Since when?"

"I don't remember, ma'am." The girl looked somewhat frightened.

"Answer me freely. I do not mean any harm to Mary. I am only interested in her welfare. You and she were out on Thursday last!"

"That was our afternoon out, ma'am."

"And of course that was the day in which she spent money so freely?"

"Yes, that was the day."

"About how much did she spend?"

"I don't know exactly. Maybe six or seven dollars."

"That will do."

The girl hastily left the room. She was growing uneasy under these questions.

Grace looked at Mrs. Essex with a meaning glance. The little woman seemed confused and at a loss to know what it all meant.

"But I do not see—" she began.

"It is just this, my dear friend," interrupted Grace. "Mary did leave that man alone in the room, and was bribed to do so. We shall have to let a detective officer examine those rooms. I fancy that he will find that the communicating door has been opened."

CHAPTER XIII.

A MEETING OF BANK DIRECTORS.

"How are you off for money?"

"I have about three thousand dollars, or thereabouts," answered Bob Rockett, to the above question from his friend Roger Glindon.

"Indeed! I did not know that you were so saving."

"Oh! it is an inheritance from my uncle. A sudden lucky turn of—"

"Of the cards, Bob?"

"Exactly," replied Bob, with a laugh. "You know my little weaknesses. I cannot help dabbling a little in the stocks. But, then, fortune favors the brave."

"Do you remember the three items of advice I gave you at our last meeting?"

"Certainly. I never forget good advice."

"And never follow it. How many of those injunctions did you obey?"

"Let me see. First, I got drunk instead of getting sober. Second, drunkenness led to gambling. Thirdly—what was the third?"

"To beware of the detective."

"Oh! yes. Well, that is all right. He wasn't around."

"There is where you are mistaken. He was around."

"The deuce!" exclaimed Bob, in surprise and alarm.

"Exactly. You have played the deuce with the whole business. They are on your track like sleuthhounds. I did not know that you were such a confounded fool, Bob. For the sake of an extra drink or two you have sold out the whole affair. But, hang me, if you shall drag me into it. By the way, how much was it you won in our game of bluff at Harry Blake's, about two months ago?"

"Somewhere near five-hundred."

"And how much did you risk the night you won the three thousand?"

"Not over five hundred."

"That's good. The money you have won on the turn of the cards, not stolen from the bank. Keep that firm in your memory. And what's more, you must be sure and have everything straight at the bank."

"What for?"

"Because you may have to lit at a moment's notice. Don't give them a hold on you. You see, Bob, they have begun to unwind the thread. The devil knows when they may come to the end of it."

"Oh, that's all my eye!" exclaimed Bob, impatiently. "I ain't afraid of them. Come, let's take a drink. We want something to wash all this down. How did you find it out?"

"I have spies in the enemy's camp," answered Roger. "There's danger in the air, Bob, let me tell you that."

This conversation took place in the morning, before banking hours. A few hours later, in the same day, the directors of the Provident National were assembled in their room at the bank, where they occupied themselves in considering the charge against Paul Essex.

"It is a very unpleasant business," remarked one of them, a heavy weight in the financial world. "The young fellow has always seemed to me prompt and energetic. I had rather it was almost any one in the bank. But, then, with a shrug of the shoulders, "sentiment is very well, but security is better. An example must be made."

"There is no doubt but it was a conspiracy against poor Rockett," returned another. "That book is a strong piece of evidence."

"We must be firm, gentlemen; and just to ourselves. But is it not time the President was here?"

As he spoke the door opened, and Mr. Garland entered.

There was a peculiar expression on his face as he cast his eyes around the circle of directors. A half-suppressed smile curled his lip.

"Good-morning, gentlemen. I am a little late this morning, for which you must excuse me. I hope I have not kept you waiting."

"Not at all. We have only just gathered."

Mr. Garland walked to his chair.

"It is poor Essex's affair this morning," he remarked.

"You might rather say it is the poor bank's affair," broke in one of the directors. "For my part I don't feel like pitying a young thief for robbing us."

"We agree with you, Mr. Jones," said several others. "An example must be made."

The conversation proceeded in an animated manner for several minutes. The whole case against Paul Essex was discussed, and the several points of evidence separately considered, with the conclusion that he was undoubtedly guilty, and that the bank owed it to itself to proceed against him severely.

"Our dignity, our honor, and our safety is concerned," said one of them gravely. "But the President says nothing. We should like to hear his opinion."

"You know that I am a personal friend of the prisoner," replied Mr. Garland, smiling. "I cannot consistently join in your sentiments."

"So are we all his friends," was the sharp answer.

"But business comes before friendship."

"But the evidence does not seem to me so strong as you make it."

"It is a perfect chain, sir. It cannot be broken."

"And again, I have another reason for favoring the prisoner."

"Very well, sir. We are ready to hear it."

"It is simply this: that I believe him innocent. And in support of my belief I have new evidence to offer."

The directors looked at each other in surprise. Here was an unexpected turn to the affair. They waited in silence.

Mr. Garland struck a sharp peal upon a small bell that lay on the desk before him. In quick response the door of the room opened, and several persons entered.

One of these was recognized by several of the di-

rectors as Grace Delorme, the President's daughter. A chair was instantly offered her by a young member of the board.

She was accompanied by a small, keen-faced man, dressed in sober gray; by a rather pretty servant girl; and by a rough-looking man, with a huge wen over his eye.

As may be imagined the directors looked with astonishment upon this cortège. They could not imagine what it meant.

Mr. Garland sat with the same half smile upon his lips.

"We have been discussing the charge against Paul Essex," he said. "I have just told the gentlemen here that new evidence is forthcoming. They wish to know the character of this evidence. What has my daughter to say upon the matter?"

Every eye was fixed upon the flushed face of Grace Delorme, as she rose from her chair, and stood in her graceful attitude before them.

"I can only say," she began, in low tones, "that I was convinced, from my knowledge of Mr. Essex, that he could not be guilty of such a crime. I therefore undertook, with the aid of a detective officer, to clear up certain defective points in the chain of evidence against him. In that I think I have succeeded. You will please examine the persons who accompany me!"

She took her seat again, a deep blush upon her face, from the persistent gaze of some of the directors. Evidently they had their own ideas in regard to her interest in Paul Essex.

As the reader must perceive the persistent watch for Topheavy had at last been successful. He had ventured out of the domicile of old Smudge, and had at once been captured. But we must let him tell his own story.

"I s'pose you gen'l'men 'll agree to what this young 'oman has said," he began, with hoarse utterance. "If I lets the thing out clean ther's to be nothing done ag'in me!"

The directors looked inquiringly at Mr. Garland. He nodded his head.

"Go on, my man," he said. "There shall be no steps taken against you."

"Coz I were forced into it, yer know. I'm a innocent sort of a chap, as makes my livin' honest. But Rusty Mike deceived me, he did. I just went it blind."

"Who is this man?" asked one of the directors.

"The third robber."

"Oh!" Topheavy was at once the center of attention.

Questions brought out from him that there was no plot with any of the bank officers, so far as he knew.

"But did you not divide the spoils with one of them?"

"No, siree. Nary divide."

"What? Are you sure of that?"

"A queer old divide, anyhow," growled Topheavy. "Ten dollars outer fifteen hundred. That's the scorchingest divide out."

"Aha! now we are coming at it," exclaimed a director. "And who was this divide made with? With Paul Essex?"

"Who's he?" asked Topheavy. "Don't know nary coon of that name."

"Who was it, then?"

"Why it were a divide with a pistol on one side. And behind the pistol—"

"Well? Who was behind the pistol?"

"Bob Rockett."

There was a quick stir, and an exclamation of surprise, at this unlooked-for answer. Topheavy seemed to enjoy the sensation he had made.

Further questioning brought out the facts of Bob Rockett's interview with the witness and the means he had taken to enforce a return of the spoils.

"This all might be very well if Rockett had returned the money to the bank," said a director. "And yet this story does not well hold together. There is yet to be explained how the book came into Paul Essex's room."

"There are other witnesses to be examined," said Grace, from her seat.

"Ah yes! I had forgotten. We had better not form an opinion until all the evidence is in."

The two remaining witnesses were the detective, and Mary, the servant with the short memory. Mary, however, had been taken to quicken her memory, as she told a somewhat different story on the present occasion.

She, in effect, related how she had been sent by Mrs. Essex to show a stranger desiring board to a vacant room. She represented him as being a nice-spoken, agreeable man, and such an honest-looking person that it was impossible to suspect him.

The room suited him exactly, so he said. He would take a wash, and make some changes in his clothes. Would she be kind enough to get a ten dollar bill changed for him? He wished to give her some little remembrance.

Mary went on to relate that on her return from her errand to change the bill she found him just leaving the room. He had changed his mind, he said, and did not think the room would suit him. She might keep the money, however. But, if she did not want to be blamed, she had better say nothing about leaving him alone in the room. She thought so, too. She had been afraid to tell the truth.

"Did you not suspect something wrong when you heard of Mr. Essex being arrested?"

"Why, no, sir. That had nothing to do with the gentleman coming there, had it?"

Mary was dismissed. She had evidently told the truth this time. The interest of the directors was increasing.

The detective was next examined. He had inves-

tigated the room in question. Had found a door opening to the front room, but locked on the other side. The key of his door had evidently been seized by nippers. He had no doubt that the door had been unlocked in this manner. There were certain scratches and marks in strong evidence that a forcible entry to the front room had been made.

But in this room no evidence appeared. The papers among which the book had been found were so scattered by the first officers who had examined them, that all signs of previous tampering with them were destroyed.

In addition to this evidence was that obtained on the night of Bob Rockett's last gambling experience. He had been seen by the officer to risk five or six hundred dollars at a faro table, from which he had won several thousands.

The directors looked at each other. All this put an entirely new light on the subject. Paul Essex was the undoubted victim of a conspiracy. Bob Rockett was as plainly one of the parties to this conspiracy. Who was the other? That could not be yet ascertained. Mary only remembered that the stranger was tall and handsome, with black eyes and heavy whiskers. She had a very indefinite recollection of his face.

"It is too bad that Essex has been imprisoned," said one of the directors. "We have treated him badly, and must offer him some redress. A message must be sent at once to the magistrate, to have him released without delay."

Mr. Garland again struck his bell. The door opened once more, and into the room walked the tall, well-formed figure of Paul Essex, a look of gravity and dignity upon his handsome face.

"I have taken the liberty to send your message in advance," remarked Mr. Garland.

Paul's sense of injured innocence could not long withstand the warm greetings, condolences, and congratulations of the directors, who crowded around him, shaking hands, and promising to repay him for all that he had endured.

Particularly when he caught a soft smile from the lips of Grace Delorme did his display of indignation vanish, and a far different expression came upon his ingenuous face.

One of the older directors had continued in his seat. He was one of those with whom business was all, sentiment nothing.

"Is Robert Rockett in the bank?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Paul. "He entered just as I came into the room."

"Will some one call him?"

The door was opened and the runner's name called out in a loud voice. One of the clerks came forward.

"He is not here, gentlemen. He left his bank-book, but he went out again immediately after entering; and in a very hurried manner."

CHAPTER XIV.

A WEDDING PARTY SURPRISE.

BOB ROCKETT had evidently "smelt a rat." Undoubtedly he had seen Paul Essex passing into the directors' room, and instantly concluded that the bank was growing too hot to hold him. He had slipped quickly out of the bank door, and had been swallowed up in the great whirlpool of New York.

It was a case of complete vanishing. Seek as they might he was not to be found. Detectives were placed upon his track, his lodgings were searched, all his known haunts were watched; but in vain. He was too cunning for them all. He had either left the city, or was hiding in some secure place of concealment.

Meanwhile the investigation of the charge against Paul Essex went on. It was proved that he was entirely innocent. Even Rusty Mike and Beau Bink, furious at not being released from prison as promised, declared that their testimony against him was false, and that they had been hired to give it by a stranger.

Who was this stranger? Their description agreed with that given by Mrs. Essex's servant. He was doubtless an accomplice of Bob Rockett in the conspiracy. But it was just as difficult to discover who he was, as to find out where Bob Rockett was.

The plotters had evidently taken the alarm in good time, and managed to disappear from the scene.

It was discovered that Roger Glindon was an occasional associate of Bob Rockett. But who could imagine that the wealthy Mr. Glindon, who kept his account in the Provident Bank, would take part in such a petty scheme of bank robbery? Besides the mysterious stranger, though agreeing with him in some particulars, had been heavily whiskered, while Roger kept his face smoothly shaved.

In short the detectives were at fault. The fox or foxes had taken cover, and the hounds were upon a cold scent.

It must not be imagined that Roger Glindon had given up his hopes of winning Grace Delorme. He was of that persistent disposition that never yields while a hope remains. He called upon her a few days after the discovery of Paul's innocence.

"I am very glad to find," he remarked, "that we were all mistaken, and that young Essex is set free. It was a base business altogether."

"Indeed it was," she warmly replied. "And I do not despair yet of discovering his enemies."

"What a shrewd little detective you are getting to be," rejoined Roger, with a laugh. "One would say that you enjoyed it."

"I do. In this case."

"But you have found nothing? I am told that Rockett defies the detectives."

"That is but for a time," she replied. "He shall be found yet." There was bitter energy in her tone.

"I declare you make one shudder," answered

Roger. "I pity poor Rockett if he falls into your hands."

"I should much rather capture his associates—the villains who have led him into these evil ways."

Their conversation continued for some time, verging to other subjects.

"I suppose young Essex is fully reinstated in your good opinion," remarked Roger.

"I never lost my good opinion of him," she coldly replied.

"But of course you have given up all idea of social intimacy with him. It is not only that he is below you in station; but, to have been the inmate of a prison, you see—"

She looked steadily at him.

"Paul Essex visits me yet," she said.

"But, do you not perceive—"

"Further than that," she interrupted, looking him firmly in the eye, "he has asked my hand in marriage."

Roger had been leaning easily forward, resting his hand upon his knee, as he sought to convince her of her error. He flung himself suddenly back in his chair at this startling announcement, while a whistle of surprise escaped from his lips.

"And I have accepted," she concluded.

"The devil!—Excuse me, Mrs. Delorme, but you startle me. I hope you have not forgotten that I am a suitor for your hand."

"And I hope you have not forgotten that you are a rejected suitor," she coldly replied, rising from her chair. "There is nothing further to be said on that subject, Mr. Glindon."

"Excuse me, there is someth'ng yet to be said," he replied, rising in his turn, while a cold sternness came into his face. "You have rejected me, Grace Delorme, for this low-born boy. You kindly inform me that you have accepted his offer of marriage. I fear you will find me a little like the dog in the manger. If I cannot have you, he shall not."

She started and turned slightly pale at the cold malignity of his tone. But then a proud smile curled her lip.

"I shall not fail to send you an invitation to the wedding," she said.

"Thanks. I will be present. But I warn you once more that you shall not marry Paul Essex."

There was a mocking smile on his lips as he turned and sought the door. Grace followed him out with the same firm pride in her eyes. But her look changed as soon as he had disappeared.

"What can he mean?" she murmured. "He is false and malignant. Is it personal harm to Paul? I must put him on his guard."

Roger passed from the house and through the streets with a dark and threatening look on his face.

"She shall not marry him," he continued, to himself. "Not if I have to play my last card to prevent her. If I cannot have her he shall not. I swear it."

He continued his walk, verging into the streets bordering upon the East river. As he got into a thickly-settled district, marked with the strongest signs of poverty and uncleanness, he grew wary and suspicious, looking frequently behind him, and turning sharp corners as if to avoid any possible pursuit.

Suddenly he slipped into the open door of a tenement-house, that stood just around one of these corners. He walked back with a hasty step, and up the stairs until he had reached the third story.

Here he knocked in a peculiar manner on the door of a room that fronted to the street.

"Who is it?" came a voice from within.

"Roger. Open."

The door was thrown open. There stood the form of Bob Rockett, but he would scarcely have been recognized except by his special friends. For his fashionable clothes had been changed for a rough and somewhat ragged suit, while his usually clean shaved face was covered with a rough beard of a week's growth, that gave him a most unattractive appearance. With the pipe that graced his lips he might well have passed for a professional tramp after a summer's campaign.

"Do you think they would recognize me, Roger?" he asked, after closing and locking the door.

"Hardly," replied Roger, looking at him quizzically. "I think you might defy the eyes of the sharpest detective."

"And when can I go on the street?"

"As soon as you have grown your beard. You did wrong, Bob. You should have stayed in the bank that day."

"What? And been arrested for theft?"

"You could have turned in the fifteen hundred dollars, with any excuse you pleased. They would have had no case against you then."

"But how about the book found in Paul's room?"

"That would have been a bad point, I confess," acknowledged Roger. "Yet conspiracy to injure a man is a different matter from robbery."

"Let them find me if they want me," exclaimed Bob, doggedly.

"Then you had better emigrate. Get out of New York until this affair blows over. They will be off your track in a month or two, and then you can safely come back."

"Good. I will do it," declared Bob. "I have cash enough to pick up some sport in other parts of the country, and I'll swear that I'm tired enough of playing rat in New York."

But we will not follow this interview any further. That night, at twelve o'clock, a decidedly seedy-looking passenger, who looked as if he was just starting an extensive beard, showed himself at the passenger station of the Erie railroad, and walked unchallenged by an officer who had an accurate description of Bob Rockett in his mind's eye.

"Farewell to New York," he said to himself, as he wiped his feet with an expressive movement on the

steps of the car. "I leave its dust behind. But I will be back again. I will coin that dust yet into gold."

And so Bob Rockett went West.

Two months after that time, on a beautiful evening in early May, a large company was assembled in the parlor of Mr. Garland's residence.

It was the wedding of his daughter which had drawn together this large and fashionable assemblage. The destined bride, in all the bloom of youth and charm of beauty, dressed in a robe of pure white, and with the folds of a snowy veil sweeping the floor at her feet, stood waiting the ceremony, a faint flush in her cheek alone announcing the emotion that burned at her heart.

By her stood Paul Essex, with his tall form and handsome face, modest yet proud, and with his eyes firmly fixed on the fair woman at his side with a look that burned with love and happiness.

In the two months which had elapsed Paul had been advanced in position at the bank. A lucky vacancy had given him the post of assistant cashier, and it was shrewdly surmised that Mr. Darling's cash and influence would soon elevate him to a still more lucrative position.

Every eye was fixed upon the handsome pair as they stood before the old minister, who was to unite them in the bonds of matrimony.

Not a word had yet been spoken, but all were waiting in hushed expectancy, when the door of the room hastily opened, and the step of a late wedding guest sounded upon the floor.

It was Roger Glindon. He wore his usually impulsive look; yet there was a peculiarly threatening expression upon his face as he looked over the assembled company at the small group gathered before the minister.

"I am not too late?" he asked, in questioning accents.

A sudden start took place at this extraordinary interruption. People crowded forward to see who was this audacious intruder. The wedding party looked around in astonishment.

"What do you mean, Mr. Glindon?" asked the father of the bride, in severe accents.

"Only that I am glad I have arrived in time to—"

"To do what?"

Grace's eyes were bent with alarm on the intruder. She remembered his threat.

"To prevent your daughter from committing bigamy."

Had a thunderbolt fallen in their midst it could not have produced a more startling effect. Exclamations, cries of alarm and astonishment, resounded from all sides. Paul grew pale as death. He made a hasty step toward the speaker. But Grace, from whose face all trace of color had fled, reeled, and would have fallen but for his protecting arm.

"Sir!" cried Mr. Garland, angrily advancing.

"I am sorry to have created such a sensation. But as I have just learned that her former husband, George Delorme, is still living, it seems to me my duty to interrupt this ceremony."

His voice was cold and plifless. His eyes fixed themselves on the half insensible bride with a look of cruel malignity. His threat had been bitterly fulfilled.

Mr. Darling grasped him by the arm.

"Sir!" he cried. "What base lie is this? You dare not affirm—you cannot prove—"

"Excuse me, sir, but will you be kind enough to read this letter?"

Mr. Darling grasped the sheet which was handed him, and ran his eyes over its contents, while the paper shook in his hands, and his face grew red and white by turns.

"You will probably recognize the handwriting," coldly remarked Roger.

"Villain!" exclaimed the father. "Was there no time and place but this to bring such news?"

"I came as a wedding guest; on your daughter's express invitation. As I do not appear to be welcome I will take my departure."

In a moment more he had walked from the room, closing the door behind him, but closing it upon the most distressing consternation.

Eager questions addressed to Mr. Darling drew from him the cause of this strange declaration.

The letter was signed by George Delorme, and was in his undoubted handwriting. It declared that he had not died by the yellow fever, as had been supposed, but, for reasons of his own, had concluded to remain incognito. Learning, however, that his wife was about to contract another marriage, he could keep silent no longer, but had written to prevent her from committing the crime of bigamy. He would be in New York within a month, and had no idea of finding another man the husband of his wife.

The result of this startling announcement may readily be conjectured. The bride was borne from the room in a fainting condition; the bridegroom was thrown into a stupor of grief and despair; and the guests were filled with anger and consternation. Many a deep threat was breathed against Roger Glindon for his dastardly action.

Here, for the present, we must leave our characters. A month has passed since then, but no change of importance has taken place. Bob Rockett is still a missing member of society; Roger Glindon is waiting with cold patience for the coming of the husband who is to place a fatal bar to Paul Essex's hopes; and the lovers themselves are waiting the same event with an agony of fear, yet not without a hope that the letter may prove a forgery, and that the plighted love of their young hearts may not be so cruelly crushed.

THE END.

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